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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how seven high-poverty middle schools demonstrated strong academic improvement so they were performing at levels consistent with, and often better than, higher-income schools in their states. Schools ranged in enrollment from 291-1,010 and represented several community types and ethnic groups. Among the characterisitics common to the seven middle schools profiled in this study: at least 50 percent of students participated in free or reduced-price lunch programs; schools' average achievement scores were at or above the state averages in mathematics and reading; schools showed a strong growth rate in reading and mathematics for at least a three-year period; schools were public, non-charter, and non-magnet (open enrollment)schools. Data collection involved interviews with administrators, teachers, staff, community members, parents, and central office administrators; focus groups with teachers, students, and parents; observations; school documentation; and teacher surveys. What differentiated these schools from demographically similar schools were conscious efforts by staff to understand school contexts and work proactively to raise all students' performance. Four characteristics emerged as essential to supporting teaching and learning: high expectations for all students; dedication to collaborative environments; commitment to supporting teaching and learning through implementation of thoughtful organizational structures and building the capacity of the system; and attention to individual students and provision of extra services and supports beyond those traditionally offered by schools. Each school understood how school improvement was affected by the larger surrounding context; intentionally and thoughtfully implemented elements leading to improvement; and used different approaches to improvement. (Contains 39 references.) (SM)

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DRIVEN TO SUCCEED: HIGH-PERFORMING, HIGH-POVERTY, TURNAROUND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Volume I: Cross-Case Analysis of High-Performing, High-Poverty, Turnaround Middle Schools

2002

The Charles A. Dana Center
The University of Texas at Austin

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Contents

Executive Summary v

Findings of This Study vi
Schools That Support Teaching and Learning vii
Understanding How Schools Improved viii
Recommendations of This Study x
Building the Capacity of the School x
Building the Capacity of Teachers xii
Building the Capacity of Students xiii
Conclusion xiv

Chapter I. Overview of This Study 1

Context of This Study 1
Purpose of This Study 2
Relevant Research 2
Design of This Study 3
Site Selection 3
Data Collection 6
Limitations 7
Organization of This Report 7

Chapter II. Schools That Support Teaching and Learning 9

Driven by a Common Purpose of High Expectations for All 9
Expressing a Common Purpose Through Care 10
Maintaining a Common Purpose Through Pride 12
Reaching a Common Purpose Through Hard Work 12
Challenges to Maintaining High Expectations for All 13
Dedicated to Collaborative Environments 14
Collaborating in Schools 14
Collaborating in Districts 15
Collaborating with Outside Entities 16
Challenges to Establishing a Collaborative Environment 18
Guided by Practices and Strategies That Support Teaching and Learning 19
Choosing Thoughtful Organizational Structures 19
Building the Capacity of the System 22
Challenges to Implementing Practices That Support Teaching and Learning 26
Attentive to Individual Students 26
Building Relationships with Students 27
Extending the School Day 27
Expanding Academic Opportunities 28
Helping Students Transition 29
Challenges to Providing Attention to Individual Students 29

Chapter III. Understanding How Schools Improved **31**

Context for Change 31
Recognizing Starting Points 31
Changing the Environment 33
Adapting to Change 34
Elements of School Improvement 35
Building a Shared Purpose Through Strong Leadership 35
Establishing a Shared Culture That Supports Teaching and Learning 39
Reflecting on Current Situations 42
Planning and Implementing Strategies 43
Re-Evaluating and Moving Forward 44
Approaches to School Improvement 45
Implementing Whole School Reform 45
Implementing Incremental Change 46

Chapter IV. Recommendations **49**

Building the Capacity of the School 49
Building the Capacity of Teachers 51
Building the Capacity of Students 52
Conclusion 52

References **55**

Executive Summary

This study investigates how seven high-poverty middle schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement so that they were performing at levels consistent with, and in many cases better than, higher-income schools in their states. The *Improving America's Schools Act* (IASA) of 1994 lowered the poverty threshold to 50 percent for schools to operate schoolwide programs that benefit all students. More recently, Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001; which mandates that all children receive the "opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (Section 1001). A key goal of the reauthorization is to close the achievement gap between subpopulations of students. To this end, the legislation mandates more district and school accountability by implementing annual state tests for grades 3–8, and mandates that states provide disaggregated student performance data already required under *IASA* for the subjects and grades tested.

The U.S. Department of Education has funded best practice studies examining how low-income schools have improved their student performance. The purpose of these studies has been to improve public education by identifying effective practices and areas for appropriate legislative change.[1] Because most of the previous work in the area of best practices has focused on elementary schools, the purpose of this study is to contribute to a larger body of work examining high-poverty, high-performing schools with an emphasis on the middle grades.

This work seeks to capture procedural knowledge that will be useful to other schools with similar student populations, school sizes, and community types. This report focuses on what practices, policies, and belief systems enhanced teaching and learning in these schools; attempts to explain how these schools improved student performance; and provides recommendations suggested by the findings.

The seven public middle schools selected had the following characteristics:

- The school was a middle grades configuration, typically serving grades 5–8.[2] No K–12, K–8, or 7–12 schools were included.
- At least 50 percent of the school's students participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program for the most recent year for which data were available.[3]
- The school's average achievement scores were at or above the state average on state mathematics and reading exams for the grade level tested in the most recent year for which data were available.
- The school showed a strong growth rate in reading and mathematics performance for at least the three-year period between 1997–98 and 1999–2000.
- The school was a public, non-charter, and non-magnet school so that only open enrollment schools were included.

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[1] The U.S. Department of Education's Planning and Evaluation Service describes the purposes of their best practices studies at www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/aboutus.html, accessed August 5, 2002.

[2] One school, Pocomoke Middle School, served grades 4–8 and another, JFK Middle School, served grades 7–9.

[3] The Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. Schools are required to serve meals at no charge to children whose household income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. Children are entitled to pay a reduced price if their household income is above 130 percent but at or below 185 percent of these guidelines. For more information see www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/Default.htm. The percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunches is commonly used as a measure of poverty in public schools

- The school had a reputation among educational leaders for using effective practices and for having made reforms that led to improved academic performance, especially among students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.
- The school represented typical high-poverty schools in terms of the economic characteristics of their school communities and the challenges they had to face.

The high-performing, high-poverty, turnaround middle schools selected for this study were Hambrick Middle School, Houston, Texas; Inman Middle School, Atlanta, Georgia; John F. Kennedy Middle School, Utica, New York; Memorial Junior High School, Eagle Pass, Texas; Pocomoke Middle School, Pocomoke City, Maryland; Rockcastle County Middle School, Mount Vernon, Kentucky; and Tonasket Middle School, Tonasket, Washington.

These schools represented a variety of school sizes, community types, geographic locales, and student populations. This variability implies that improving student performance is not dependent on any one given set of criteria or circumstances.

Teams of three trained staff members made one four-day visit to each site between November 2001 and March 2002. During each visit, team members interviewed administrators, teachers, other school staff, program staff, and when appropriate, community members, parents, and central office staff. Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers, students, and parents. In addition to interviews and focus group discussions, a variety of observations were conducted to get a sense of school climate. These included a minimum of four classes at each school, school transition times, and staff meetings. School documentation, such as lesson plans, student work, school-disseminated information, and school improvement plans, were collected as evidence of embedded practices. Finally, all teachers at each school were invited to complete a survey.[4]

The study design limited findings on several topics important to middle school improvement. Topics beyond the scope of this study include observable changes to classroom practices, teacher certification issues, and school improvement sustainability. Additionally, several elements, such as high expectations for all, strong leadership, thoughtful organizational structures, and attention to individual students, separate these schools from other demographically similar schools, but do not make them outliers. Rather these same elements can and should be replicated in other high-poverty schools.

This summary is organized into two parts. The first section details the findings of this study—the characteristics that people at these school communities interpreted as essential to supporting teaching and learning and the approaches to school improvement these schools took. The second section provides recommendations that the findings suggest for policymakers and practitioners.

Findings of This Study

Findings from this study indicate that the seven study schools have challenged the low performance trend established by high-poverty middle schools and can therefore provide insight into the policies, practices, programs, and strategies that are necessary to attain high levels of academic achievement for their students.

Although the performance these schools exhibit is rare for middle schools, especially those with a concentration of students who live in poverty, the schools themselves are not unique. They have comparable student and teacher populations to many middle schools across the country. They

[4] The response rate for the surveys was 52 percent.

have equal access to fiscal and human resources. They have structures and processes that determine how decisions are made and how people interact.

What differentiates these schools from other demographically similar schools are the conscious efforts staff made to understand the schools' contexts and to work proactively to raise the performance of each and every student. Because these schools are representative of middle schools across the country, they can illuminate how they support teaching and learning at the middle school level as well as how middle schools can improve.

Schools That Support Teaching and Learning

Four characteristics emerged as essential to supporting teaching and learning at these schools. First, these schools had a focus on high expectations for all students. Entire school communities shared a common purpose to hold every student to high standards and to work hard to reach this goal. Second, study schools intentionally built collaborative relationships between school staff, with district offices, and with outside agencies. Third, staff in these schools increased the capacity of the system by focusing on human and non-human resources and by thoughtfully implementing organizational structures. Finally, staff in these schools focused on the individual student and provided targeted interventions and extra services to ensure that no child became invisible. These four key findings are presented along with the factors that are integral to sustaining them.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed hold high expectations for all students.

High expectations for all students moved people at these schools in a shared direction and helped eliminate distractions. This common purpose was sustained through

- Making intentional choices to care about individual students by giving them opportunities to build meaningful relationships with adults. These relationships motivated students academically. Additionally, staff at these schools cared about each other as professionals.
- Instilling pride and recognition for student and staff commitment to improved academic performance. Internal and external recognition validated staff and students and motivated them to excel.
- Being committed and staying focused on high expectations for all. Hard work and visible results created an achievement momentum that inspired the staff to continue their efforts.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed are dedicated to collaborative environments.

These school built collaborative environments through

- Creating a democratic environment in schools where staff input was valued and staff had considerable decision making responsibility in their areas of expertise, as well as control over their professional growth.
- Redefining relationships with districts so that districts supported schools and provided them with independence and decision making authority over issues affecting campuses, such as curricular decisions and resource management.

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- Seeking relationships with outside entities such as community organizations and universities. These outside entities provided additional student services and support beyond the capacity of the school.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed are committed to supporting teaching and learning through implementing thoughtful organizational structures and building the capacity of the system.

These schools supported teaching and learning through

- Implementing organizational structures such as student teaming, common planning time for teachers, block scheduling, and appropriate student behavior programs in ways that respected the unique situations and circumstances of each school context.
- Building the capacity of the school system by using data to make informed decisions and determine areas of need. Staff were trained in how to understand data and use data to create systematic processes for targeting improvement areas.
- Building the capacity of the school system by providing staff the flexibility to choose what professional development opportunities were most useful, then providing professional development that was ongoing and in-depth. Professional development was expanded to include working with curriculum lead teachers, peer observation and coaching, and teaming.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed pay attention to individual students and provide extra services and support beyond those traditionally offered by schools.

Being attentive to individual students required providing resources such as time and money that could be used for

- Creating structured programs that allowed all students to be known by an adult and prevented students from being invisible.
- Extending the school day so that students had additional access to academic support as well as access to meaningful activities that gave students a sense of belonging.
- Expanding academic opportunities during the school day by offering students more time in academically oriented classes and more academically oriented electives, and by providing more access to academic supports, such as in-school tutoring.
- Helping elementary students transition into the middle school setting through structured programs such as study skills workshops, buddy programs, and ongoing transition teams.

Understanding How Schools Improved

The schools in this study set high expectations for all as a common purpose, created collaborative environments, thoughtfully implemented practices and strategies, and attended to individual students. While it is important to understand what these high-performing schools are doing, it is also important to understand how they arrived at this point. Before their turnarounds, many of these schools had a history of low student and staff morale; low student performance; chaotic and, in some instances, unsafe environments; and poor reputations. Yet these schools were able to improve. Why were staff willing to change their behaviors? What motivated them and supported them in these efforts? Understanding how critical events and key people led to change as

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well as how school staff became involved in the change process is useful to other schools wanting to improve student performance.

Three factors were significant in these schools' improvement efforts. First, each school recognized their unique contexts and the challenges they faced, and they reacted positively and productively to changes in their environments. Second, the study schools used common elements that led to change, including building a shared purpose; reflecting on the existing setting before implementing change; planning and implementing improvement strategies; and re-evaluating their efforts. Finally, these schools used different approaches to school improvement. Some used a whole school approach while others enacted strategies and programs incrementally.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed understand how their school improvement efforts are affected by the larger context surrounding them.

Understanding the broader context surrounding these schools depended on

- Recognizing the challenges, such as poverty, low student performance, poor reputations, and defeatist attitudes, as well as the strengths, such as a stable teaching core and the availability of additional resources that these schools faced as they began the improvement process.
- Understanding how changes in environments, such as at the state and local level, affected the improvement process. These changes served as catalysts for action. Contextual changes that these schools faced include changes in state standards and accountability systems, new leadership at the district and school level, and changes in facilities.
- Choosing to react positively and proactively to the changes in the environment by looking at critical events as motivators and opportunities for improvement rather than being passive or reacting negatively to these events.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed intentionally and thoughtfully implement elements which lead to school improvement.

Improving these schools required that key elements be put into place. This happened in these schools by

- Building a shared purpose of high expectations for all students through strong leadership. These leaders envisioned and communicated a clear purpose. They shared leadership and led by example in order to develop consensus. They reduced distractions to teaching. Finally, these leaders took primary responsibility for maintaining vigilance over the school's purpose.
- Shaping a culture that supported high expectations for all students through leaders and staff taking responsibility for embedding their shared purpose in daily activities, language, and interactions.
- Reflecting on schools' current situations and systematically identifying areas needing improvement. Most notably, schools used student performance data to identify weaknesses in instruction and curriculum.
- Planning and implementing appropriate and well-supported strategies to address targeted needs. Staff informed their planning through research, professional development, and outside technical assistance. Planning resulted in horizontal and vertical curricular

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alignment to standards, eliminating duplicate services, and aligning professional development with identified needs.
- Re-evaluating if targeted goals were met, then planning for how to move forward in the improvement process.

Key Finding: Schools that are driven to succeed use different approaches to school improvement.

Implementing school improvements occurred in one of two ways
- Applying a whole school improvement model where many areas of the school were affected simultaneously; for example, changes were made to curriculum, school organization, and professional development at the same time.
- Making changes to the school incrementally and basing changes on needs rather than a whole school improvement model. These approaches included piloting programs in one grade level before implementing schoolwide, introducing one change at a time, or dealing with the most pressing issues first, such as improving student behavior.

Recommendations of This Study

The findings discussed above imply numerous policy and practice actions that states, districts, and schools can take to improve student performance. These recommendations follow from the findings and are framed around how the seven study schools invested in increasing the capacity of the school, the staff, and the students in order to improve student performance. Each general recommendation is supported by specific action steps leaders can take to affect school improvement. These recommendations are not meant to serve as a laundry list of how to improve student performance. Rather, these are starting points to be pursued thoughtfully and critically by whole staffs committed to and hungry for student improvement.

Building the Capacity of the School

One implication from the findings was that the staff at the seven study schools viewed increasing the capacity of the entire school as an important step in their school improvement efforts. They realized that knowledge, ideas, and inspiration could not be held in the hands of only a few if their efforts were to succeed. This section outlines recommendations and examples of action steps that these schools used.

Recommendation:	**Maintain high expectations for all students.**
Action Step:	Define expectations that are in line with state standards and frequently communicate these expectations to students, families, and staff.
Action Step:	Align curriculum vertically and horizontally with state standards so that students are exposed to the material they are expected to master.
Action Step:	Reward students and teachers for commitment to high expectations by recognizing their efforts and embedding this recognition in the daily practices of the schools.

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Recommendation:	**Ensure all students are provided a quality education.**
Action Step:	Incorporate all students, including those receiving special education and English as a Second Language services, in mainstream classrooms and provide them with the same content received by other students.
Action Step:	Increase the enrollment of traditionally underserved students in advanced-level classes, such as Algebra I in the eighth grade and gifted and talented programs.
Action Step:	Implement a "no-failure policy" that ensures struggling students are identified early and receive supports, such as additional tutoring, to help them succeed.

Recommendation:	**Train and recruit leaders to guide school improvement efforts.**
Action Step:	Identify leaders with a definite vision for school improvement who are not paralyzed by obstacles facing high-poverty schools and who are willing to make changes that respect a school's unique context.
Action Step:	Advocate for leaders who value building consensus and sharing decision making authority.
Action Step:	Provide leaders with time to introduce staff to change, create a shared purpose, and plan for progress.

Recommendation:	**Provide data that schools and staff can use to make curricular and instructional decisions.**
Action Step:	Ensure staff have training in how to make data meaningful and useful to school improvement efforts.
Action Step:	Use data to identify areas of weakness in school performance by disaggregating data by grade level, subject area, learning strand, gender, ethnicity, and income levels.
Action Step:	Use student-level performance data to target struggling students for additional academic support.

Recommendation:	**Expand current ideas of what resources are and how to use resources to affect school improvement.**
Action Step:	Expose staff to views of resources that go beyond money to include time, space, and relationships.
Action Step:	Provide school staff with training on how to access more human and non-human resources, such as through building partnerships with outside organizations and applying for grants.
Action Step:	Redistribute space, time, and money on campuses to better support schoolwide learning goals through compensating teachers for tutoring and professional development, creating additional academic

programs, and providing teachers with needed materials.

Recommendation:	**Create more intimate school settings that focus on improving student learning.**
Action Step:	Train staff on how to implement elements of the middle school concept, such as teaming and block scheduling, that increase the amount of time and intensity students have with a smaller group of teachers.
Action Step:	Provide students with opportunities to build relationships with adults through small groupings and mentoring programs.
Action Step:	Eliminate distractions to teaching through organizational changes, such as eliminating bells and grouping grade-level teams in the same area of the buildings.

Building the Capacity of Teachers

The second implication from the findings was that study schools made large investments in increasing the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality curriculum and instruction. Improving student performance would have been impossible if teachers were not effectively supported. This section discusses the recommendations the study results imply and the action steps to achieve those recommendations.

Recommendation:	**Provide school staff with meaningful professional development closely aligned with individual and schoolwide needs.**
Action Step:	Offer professional development opportunities that address specifically defined student learning goals and that are ongoing and in-depth, such as university courses and workshops with intensive follow-up sessions.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with alternative forms of professional development, such as peer coaching and curriculum lead teachers, which allow them to create shared professional knowledge with their school colleagues.

Recommendation:	**Treat staff as professionals whose input and expertise are valued.**
Action Step:	Provide teachers with more authority to make decisions about areas that most affect their work, such as professional growth, curricular and instructional choices, and school organization.
Action Step:	Compensate teachers for the time they spend in additional activities, such as curriculum alignment, professional development, and student tutoring, through stipends or by providing substitutes teachers so that these activities could take place during regular

	working hours.
Action Step:	Ask teachers what resources, materials, and supplies they need to be effective in their classrooms and then provide it.

Recommendation:	**Ensure staff have opportunities for collaboration.**
Action Step:	Guarantee structured opportunities, such as common planning time and faculty or department meetings, for teachers to work together and discuss curricular and instructional issues.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with training on how to most effectively use collaborative time to improve student learning.
Action Step:	Allow teachers time to experiment and learn how this collaborative process operates in their unique settings.

Building the Capacity of Students

Finally, the seven study schools focused on increasing the capacity of students by providing them with the academic and developmental support necessary to reach high expectations. Students were active participants in this process and worked to improve their achievement. They understood the supports and services available to them and made use of them. This section offers recommendations for ways to increase the capacity of students and action steps to support this goal.

Recommendation:	**Ensure all students are provided a supportive school environment.**
Action Step:	Educate staff about the unique developmental needs of middle-grade students.
Action Step:	Create formal and structured programs that guarantee that each student is known by an adult.
Action Step:	Encourage a strong, positive adult daily presence in the school so that students see adults as allies.
Action Step:	Educate students about how to approach adults for assistance and support.

Recommendation:	**Provide extensive in-school academic support.**
Action Step:	Expand academic opportunities during the school day by offering students more time in academically oriented classes.
Action Step:	Reduce the amount of non-academic electives and provide more academically oriented electives for students to take.
Action Step:	Create formal structures to provide in-school academic support such as individual tutoring and homework assistance centers.

Recommendation:	**Extend the school day to offer academic and non-academic after-school services.**
Action Step:	Create structured and ongoing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful after-school activities, such as project-based learning, academic clubs, and non-academic activities, with adults.
Action Step:	Partner with community organizations, universities, and volunteers to increase the potential for offering services.
Action Step:	Eliminate obstacles to student participation in after-school programs such as cost, transportation, and food, by redistributing resources or bringing in additional resources.

Conclusion

The teachers, support staff, administrators, students, parents, district personnel, and representatives from outside agencies who shared their stories for this study were able to eloquently and enthusiastically describe why their particular schools were successful and how these schools were able to improve. Equally as impressive was what they did not say—virtually none of the participants in this study made excuses for not holding all students to high expectations. They did not complain about a lack of time or resources. They did not disparage their administration or district. They did not protest against state standards and accountability systems. They did not place blame on their colleagues. Most notably, they did not use the students' and their families' home and community situations as an excuse for poor student academic performance.

All seven of these schools showed impressive student performance improvement in a relatively short period of time. Most moved from below average on state (and in some cases, national) assessments to above average. These schools accomplished this inspiring achievement through a belief that each and every student could achieve at high levels and that each student deserved to achieve at high levels. The staff in these schools took responsibility for student learning and found ways to provide staff and students with the support they needed to reach their goals. This responsibility required a commitment to hard work and a no-excuses attitude toward identifying and solving problems. By working together, individuals helped turn these schools around.

The seven schools in this study do not purport to have achieved their goals. Rather, the staff at these schools insist they have much more work to do. Some still wrestle with helping all students meet the state standards. Some schools struggle to provide more students with advanced-level courses that emphasize critical thinking and applied knowledge. Others see balancing between students' academic and developmental needs as a challenge. The staff at these schools are in the habit of looking ahead to identify problems. They are also in the habit of taking the responsibility to identify solutions to these problems and feel it is their duty to follow through with collective action.

Those who work in similar settings understand what these schools have accomplished. Not only are these schools performing better than schools with similar demographics, but they are performing as well as and often better than more affluent schools. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these schools are inimitable—that what they have accomplished cannot be accomplished elsewhere. These schools are like hundreds across the country. They serve a high proportion of students living in poverty; they have a range of teaching and leadership expertise; and they have a range of access to resources. Their successes stem from the commonality of purpose and their willingness to work hard together to achieve their goals. They provide valuable lessons for other school communities taking on the difficult challenge of setting high expectations for all

students. These seven middle schools have proved that it can be done because they were driven to succeed.

Chapter I. Overview of This Study

This study investigates how seven high-poverty middle schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement from at least the 1997–98 school year to the 1999–2000 school year. This work seeks to capture procedural knowledge that will be useful to other schools with similar student populations, school sizes, and community types. The study focuses on what practices, policies, and belief systems led to improved student performance in these middle school settings.

Context of This Study

In 1989, the Carnegie Corporation produced a thought-provoking report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, which asked the nation to consider whether we were adequately meeting the educational needs of our early adolescent youth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). The report charged educators with improving middle school education. The report's call to action resulted in a variety of intervention efforts supported by major funders such as the Carnegie Corporation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Norton and Lewis 2000).

Despite this increased attention, almost 10 years later systemic reform of middle schools remained an elusive goal. The Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB's) 1999 report on improving middle schools noted that while state policymakers had invested in early childhood intervention programs and more rigorous high school graduation requirements, relatively little investment had been made in middle school education. Underscoring this absence of attention to the middle school years, the SREB called this practice "book end investments." Data from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that about 28 percent of all eighth-graders scored below basic achievement levels in reading, 35 percent in mathematics, and 35 percent in science.

While this information is cause for concern, the achievement levels of middle school students in high-poverty schools are even more alarming. Edwards (1998) has noted that in urban, high-poverty schools, two-thirds or more of the students perform below the basic level on national tests. These schools most often serve students of color. NAEP data from 1998 show that almost 50 percent of African-American and Hispanic eighth-graders scored below basic achievement levels in reading. Performance in mathematics was even more unsettling: On the 2000 NAEP, 68 percent of African-American eighth-graders and 59 percent of Hispanic eighth-graders scored below the basic level. This information suggests that many of our nation's middle schools, especially those serving substantial populations of children of color and children in poverty, are not prepared for the goals of "academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity" set by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (Norton and Lewis 2000, 6).

Improving middle grades education has proven difficult. Much of what is known about high-performing, high-poverty schools is in the context of elementary schools and may not apply to the middle school environment. Middle schools have more students and staff, more structure, and more bureaucracy than elementary schools. Compared to high schools, middle schools also have different structural and organizational arrangements (U.S. Department of Education 2000).

Joan Lipsitz and her colleagues (1997) found that the most common barriers to middle school change were a loss of intensity and focus by those leading the change efforts, frequent turnover in leadership, school staff who lacked an understanding of middle-grade issues, political friction within and beyond the campus, and a lack of long-term vigilance on the part of enough individuals. Researchers have noted that high-poverty middle schools in particular have been the last to benefit from reform efforts (Gandara 1994; Geiser and Berman 2000; Jackson and Davis 2000; Little and Dorph 1998; Olsen 1998). More needs to be learned about the policies, practices,

programs, and strategies that have helped high-poverty middle schools attain high levels of academic achievement for all students.

Purpose of This Study

This study investigates how seven high-poverty middle schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement so that they were performing at levels consistent with, and in many cases better than, higher-income schools in their states. The *Improving America's Schools Act* (IASA) of 1994 lowered the poverty threshold to 50 percent for schools to operate schoolwide programs that benefit all students. More recently, Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2002; which mandates that all children receive the "opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (Section 1001). A key goal of the reauthorization is to close the achievement gap between subpopulations of students. To this end, the legislation mandates more district and school accountability by implementing annual state tests for grades 3–8, and mandates that states provide disaggregated student performance data already required under *IASA* for the subjects and grades tested.

Relevant Research

Middle grades research guided the study questions, site selection process, and data collection and analysis methods for this study by deepening the understanding of what experts in the field view as the essential elements of high-performing middle schools and the factors that affect successful change. Although schools were selected based mainly on student achievement scores on state and national reading and mathematics exams, research indicates that test scores should not be used as the sole indicator of a school's high performance. Along with high scores on state and national exams, high-performing schools exhibit a variety of characteristics that result in a learning environment that challenges and engages the whole school community.

High-Performing Middle Schools

Research shows that high-performing middle schools generally exhibit four broad characteristics (Geiser and Berman 2000; Jackson and Davis 2000; Mayer, Mullens, and Moore 2000; National Middle School Association 2001; SREB 1999):

- They share a belief in excellence and equity for all.
- They develop challenging curriculum with high expectations and provide expert instructional methods that prepare all students to achieve higher standards.
- They create a collaborative school environment that promotes intellectual development and shared purpose.
- They actively invite parents and the larger community to participate in and support student learning.

These characteristics of high-performing middle schools imply a need to address both the academic and developmental needs of middle school students.

Other research is available on the factors that contribute to improved student performance. Some of this information emerged from research on reform efforts launched by the Title I legislation in 1994. The 1994 Amendments to Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* required that students served by Title I be measured by the same statewide assessments as other students, and those assessments were to be aligned with curriculum and include performance standards (Improving America's Schools Act 1994). In addition, the revised Title I law mandated that a larger percentage of eligible secondary school students be provided with services than in the past. Previously, Title I funds were spent almost entirely on elementary-age students. Consequently,

these changes in assessments under Title I affected middle schools much more than before (Lewis 1995).

The *Longitudinal Evaluation of School Change and Performance (LESCP) in Title I Schools* examined the effects of standards-based reforms supported by Title I (U.S. Department of Education 2001). The LESCP report, like others, found that numerous factors contributed to student performance gains. Generally, these school and classroom practices included visibility of standards and assessments, strong and varied instructional practices, professional development in both content and pedagogy, curriculum that is aligned with state and local standards, and outreach to parents of low-achieving students (p. 6-7). Additionally, recommendations from organizations such as the Carnegie Corporation and the National Middle School Association indicated that addressing the developmental needs of students was essential to improving student achievement (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989; NMSA 2001).

Change Processes

It is important not only to learn what has changed in schools that have demonstrated strong improvement, but also to understand the change process itself. Many of the current theories of school change have been adapted from the corporate management world to meet the structures and needs of educational systems. Frameworks such as Glasser's Quality Schools (1990), Bonstingl's Total Quality Management (1992), and Senge's Fifth Discipline (2000) offered schools theories for positive change achieved through shared decision making, mutual trust, and interdependence. Rather than viewing change as a top-down or isolated process, these frameworks described change as requiring consistent effort by an entire team, working together toward common objectives based upon an accepted vision and mission, and using quantitative and qualitative data to measure how well the system was meeting the needs of all the stakeholders both inside and outside the organization.

If there is already good information available about the necessary features for successful change within school systems, why aren't more schools high-performing? Geiser and Berman's (2000) work on high-performing learning communities found several challenges to implementing change. These included getting buy-in, planning with detailed follow-through, providing ongoing support and professional development, adapting to fit the context, and evaluating and cycling back during implementation. Furthermore, Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues (1993) suggested that for meaningful change to occur, schools must first bring about key changes in leadership processes and in staff attitudes.

Design of This Study

Research on characteristics of high-performing, high-poverty schools and theories about the change process informed the study design. Because of this work, sites were examined through a lens sensitive to the issues of collaboration, shared decision making, capacity building, reaction to adversity, the interconnectedness of school systems and broader contexts, and how these processes occur. Changes were considered related to standards, assessments, accountability, staff, collaboration and support, school environment, and community support.

This section of the report describes the site selection process and the selection criteria used, and provides a brief overview of the seven sites. It also explains the data collection methods and discusses some of the limitations of this study.

Site Selection

The following criteria guided the selection of schools:

- The school was a middle grades configuration, typically serving grades 5–8.[5] No K–12, K–8, or 7–12 schools were included.
- At least 50 percent of the school's students participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program for the most recent year for which data were available.[6]
- The school's average achievement scores were at or above the state average on state mathematics and reading exams for the grade level tested in the most recent year for which data were available.
- The school showed a strong growth rate in reading and mathematics performance for at least the three-year period between 1997–98 and 1999–2000.
- The school was a public, non-charter, and non-magnet school so that only open enrollment schools were included.
- The school had a reputation among educational leaders for using effective practices and for having made reforms that led to improved academic performance, especially among students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.
- The school represented typical high-poverty schools in terms of the economic characteristics of their school communities and the challenges they had to face.

Achievement Criteria

At a minimum, study schools needed to show growth rates that were stronger than state average growth rates in both reading and mathematics. Schools that had moved from low levels of performance (below the state mean) to levels at or above the state mean would have interesting stories to tell.[7]

The schools selected had high percentages of free or reduced-price lunch program participation, ranging from 50 percent to 95 percent, with an average of 70 percent. Anecdotal evidence was collected regarding the neighborhood characteristics of each of the study schools in order to help readers gain a deeper understanding of the economic characteristics of the school communities.

School Settings

The schools ranged in enrollment size from a low of 291 to a high of 1,010, and represented several different community types, including urban, central city, small town, and rural. The schools also served a diverse range of ethnicities. Some of the schools served predominately one ethnicity, and others had a mix of ethnicities.[8]

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[5] One school, Pocomoke Middle School, served grades 4–8 and another, JFK Middle School, served grades 7–9.

[6] The Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. Schools are required to serve meals at no charge to children whose household income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. Children are entitled to pay a reduced price if their household income is above 130 percent but at or below 185 percent of these guidelines. For more information see www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/Default.htm. The percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunches is commonly used as a measure of poverty in public schools.

[7] All but one of the study schools had been below state averages prior to their turnaround. Although Inman Middle School has never shown performance below the state mean, the school was selected because of the high levels of performance it currently shows and the strong growth rates it exhibited, especially given its urban location.

[8] Eight schools were originally included in this study, but one school was excluded from the study after site selection and site visit because of a substantial drop in student performance and inconsistent information about efforts to improve student performance.

Study Sites

School profiles and descriptions of each of the seven schools are found in Table 1.

Table 1: School Characteristics, 1999–2000

School	Grades served	Enrollment	Free or reduced-price lunch	Race/ ethnicity	Community type*	Performance indicators for 1999–2000
Hambrick Middle School Houston, TX	7–8	985	82%	Hispanic 71% African American 22% White 7%	urban fringe	Students were performing above state average on the state reading and mathematics assessments and had shown stronger growth rates on both tests than the state average.
Inman Middle School Atlanta, GA	6–8	710	70%	African American 57% White 39% Asian 1% Other 3%	large central city	Students were performing well above state averages on the state assessments in reading, language arts, and mathematics, and demonstrated growth rates above the state average.
JFK Middle School Utica, NY	7–9	968	65%	White 69% African American 16% Hispanic 12% Asian 3%	mid-sized central city	Students were performing above the state average on both the language arts and mathematics assessment and demonstrated growth rates above the state average.
Memorial Junior High School Eagle Pass, TX	7–8	1,010	95%	Hispanic 97% Native American 2% Other 1%	small town	While students were slightly below state average with respect to the percentage of students passing the state reading assessment (87% passed compared to the state's 89%), students were above state average on the mathematics and writing assessments. The school demonstrated growth rates above the state average.

School	Grades served	Enrollment	Free or reduced-price lunch	Race/ ethnicity	Community type*	Performance indicators for 1999–2000
Pocomoke Middle School **Pocomoke, MD**	4–8	536	51%	African American 52% White 47% Other 1%	small town	Students were performing above state average on the reading and mathematics assessments and demonstrated growth rates above the state average.
Rockcastle County Middle School **Mt. Vernon, KY**	6–8	712	61%	White 98% Hispanic 2%	small town	Students were performing at or above state averages in reading, mathematics, and language arts assessments and demonstrated growth rates above the state average.
Tonasket Middle School **Tonasket, WA**	6–8	291	58%	White 81% Hispanic 17% African American 1% Other 1%	rural	Although scores fell slightly in 2001, 2000 scores were above state average on both the reading and mathematics assessments, and the school demonstrated growth rates above the state average.

* Community type is based on definitions established by the Common Core Data, a program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, is a comprehensive, annual, national statistical database of information concerning all public elementary and secondary schools. More information can be found at nces.ed.gov/ccd/.

Data Collection

Teams of three staff members made one four-day visit to each site between November 2001 and March 2002. During each visit, team members interviewed administrators, teachers, other school staff, program staff, and when appropriate, community members, parents, and central office staff. Focus group discussions were held with teachers, students, and parents. In addition to interviews and focus group discussions, a variety of observations were conducted to get a sense of school climate. School documentation, such as lesson plans, student work, and school improvement plans were collected as evidence of embedded practices. Finally, all teachers at each school were invited to complete a survey.[9]

[9] The response rate for the survey was 52 percent.

Limitations

Several topics important to middle school improvement were beyond the scope of the study. Because of the limited time study staff spent in classrooms, making any statements about how specific classroom instruction changed would be an inappropriate use of the data. Additionally, while teacher certification is an important topic for middle school education, it is not possible for this study to report meaningful findings. Furthermore, no control group was included in these case studies; therefore it is inappropriate to use the results for more than triangulation purposes.

Organization of This Report

The remainder of this report is organized into three parts: The first section outlines the characteristics that people in the study school communities interpreted as essential to supporting teaching and learning. The second section focuses on the school staff's perceptions of how their schools improved. The third section offers recommendations for others engaging in similar improvement processes.

While the following analysis can only give a broad overview of the seven study schools, the accompanying report *Volume II: Case Studies of High-Poverty, High-Performing, Turnaround Middle Schools* offers in-depth case studies of each school.

Chapter II. Schools That Support Teaching and Learning

The schools in the study set high expectations for all as a common focus and built collaborative environments that led to shared and effective decision making; they also implemented practices and strategies that allowed them to give intensive attention to individual students. Some of these strategies included using data to drive instruction and aligning curriculum. The schools attended to individual students by establishing caring relationships with students and creating small, nurturing environments. Staff worked to effectively use their limited resources to support their efforts. Schools supplemented limited financial resources by involving the surrounding community.

This chapter examines what characteristics contributed to the study schools' high student performance. It is organized into four sections.

- **Driven by a Common Purpose**. This section focuses on how having high expectations for all drove these school communities. The high expectations informed the interactions, practices, and strategies of school staff and were expressed through care, pride, and hard work.
- **Dedicated to Collaborative Environments**. This section analyzes the nature of the interactions between people and how these interactions fostered collaborative environments and allowed for shared decision making within schools, between schools and districts, and between schools and the larger community.
- **Committed to Supporting Teaching and Learning**. The third section focuses on practices and strategies that the school communities used to help students succeed. Schools implemented thoughtful organizational structures and emphasized building the capacity of the schools.
- **Attentive to Individual Students**. This section describes the strategies school staff used to ensure that each student received attention. Schools focused on building relationships with students, extending the school day, expanding academic opportunities, and helping students transition.

These four areas—common purpose, collaborative environments, practices and strategies, and attention to individual students—complemented each other and were each essential to supporting high student performance.

Driven by a Common Purpose of High Expectations for All

Staff at the seven study schools shared a common purpose of holding high expectations for their students. They believed that all students could learn and that all students deserved to learn. Staff expressed this shared purpose by not accepting failure from students. For example, a teacher from Tonasket Middle School described a mindset that emerged among school staff who expected "no failure. We will not let you fail. You are not going to." The staff at Rockcastle County Middle School also communicated this shared purpose. A staff member explained how "not accepting failure from our students, having high expectations, and being able to vocalize those expectations to our students, . . . I would credit as one of the major things [that improved student performance]." There was the expectation that students would do whatever it took to succeed and that staff members would provide whatever supports were necessary to help them succeed. A part of this commitment to high expectations was that faculty in these schools accepted responsibility for student learning and set high expectations for themselves and their colleagues. A JFK Middle School teacher stated that "the greatest impact . . . is from my colleagues. They really set the mark for me. . . . They just set a standard for me that sometimes I have trouble running to catch up to them."

Equity was an important part of the common purpose in these schools. These schools made sure that students from low-income backgrounds and minority students received the same standard

of education as other students. A student's background and prior academic performance did not qualify as a reason to lower expectations, as explained by the curriculum specialist at Rockcastle County Middle School:

> I think when you're working in a school district with a high poverty level, your expectations can be very low with students. And we don't accept those kind of reasons—and we don't look at students that way. You know, Kentucky's motto is all students can learn and at high levels. And I think we've taken that to heart. And we have high expectations for our students.

At these schools, equity meant attention to all students. A Pocomoke Middle School staff member shared, "We want to help every individual child. We want to understand if they're having problems and [why]." Like all other students, special needs students, such as those receiving special education services or in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, were expected to meet high standards. At Tonasket Middle School, for example, the staff made an effort to include students receiving special education services in mainstream classes and hold them responsible for the same state standards as other students. At Hambrick Middle School, ESL teachers moved away from the suggested state curriculum because they felt that it was not challenging: "We can't use the regular ESL materials that are put out by the state because they're just too easy. You can finish them so quickly. . . . They just don't have enough meat in them." Other schools, like Inman Middle School, focused on providing all students with high-level material by placing more students in gifted and talented classes and Algebra I in eighth grade. Staff at these schools understood that equity was not a value that could be applied only when it was easy or convenient.

Setting high expectations and equity as a common purpose was a characteristic found in all of the schools visited. This characteristic enabled staff and students to focus their efforts on improving student performance—leading toward the same goal and eliminating distractions along the way. These schools manifested their high expectation and concern for equity in three ways: through caring about the students; by instilling pride in staff and students; and through diligence, commitment, and hard work of staff and students.

Expressing a Common Purpose Through Care

The commitment to holding high expectations for all expressed by staff at the seven study schools was evident in the caring environments they built for themselves and for students. Staff at these schools cared for each other as professionals. They built communities that supported their work. Like McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) assert, the relationships school staff had with each other significantly affected classroom practices and teacher satisfaction. The teachers in these schools often described themselves as close-knit groups that felt like families. A teacher at Memorial Junior High School described the strong ties among staff members at her school:

> It seems like that's just the kind of staff we've become. You know, if somebody's in trouble, we always try to somehow pull together as a family. And that's what we consider ourselves to be, just an extended—very large, extended family.

Staff not only cared for each other, but also for their students. Teachers viewed caring for their students as connected to high expectations. For example, a teacher at Hambrick Middle School explained, "I think you'll find that every teacher now has very high expectations for our children and we genuinely like teaching and we genuinely love kids." At Pocomoke Middle School the staff strongly identified themselves as caring; "We care about [students]. I mean, this is a very caring staff,

sometimes to a fault." Students understood and valued that adults cared about them. A Memorial Junior High School student explained:

> Here, when you have a problem and a teacher finds out or whatever, they stop, like when they have their off period or whatever, and they go take you out of your class and they ask, "Well what's wrong? Can I do anything to help you?"

The care teachers extended to each other and students did not occur haphazardly. It happened through intentional choices to be invested and engaged in. It was the kind of care described by Goldstein (1998) as an intellectual, ethical, and philosophical choice. Teachers chose to know their students and created ways for this to occur. Because students and adults had the opportunity to know one another in a more intimate way, more caring relationships were created. In small schools, opportunities to build these relationships may have come more easily, but the large schools participating in this study provided structures that made their schools feel smaller. Regardless of the setting, in all seven schools, adults made themselves available to students. At Hambrick Middle School, a teacher explained that the school's principal set a tone for knowing and attending to individual students by making this a priority:

> She knows kids. I mean, she knows what almost every child's name is. She knows who they are. She's always walking around the school and she knows who the kids are and they know her. And you can tell she cares about them very much.

This environment supported the schools' commitment to helping students improve academically. Staff at Rockcastle County Middle School directly attributed their academic improvement to the care the staff showed for their students. A staff member explained how:

> I feel like the underlying factor there, the driving force of our staff, [is] we care about kids. We have staff members that will go the extra mile for our students and I think that's reflected in our test scores and why we've been a successful school.

Teachers believed it was important for students to know that adults in the school cared about whether they succeeded or failed. A teacher at Memorial Junior High School explained how they understood that this belief served as an important motivator for students:

> If they know that we care about them and that we want them to succeed and that we're going to be right there, they try harder. I mean, teachers will do whatever it takes to make learning fun and to motivate the kids. The kids wonder why, and the only thing we can come up with is because we care. And I think that has really been the magic behind everything here.

Students also recognized how care contributed to academic motivation. An Inman Middle School student explained how he reciprocated when he felt his teachers cared: "A teacher that doesn't care most of the time, I can't deal with that because if she don't care [about you], that means you don't want to care about what she's doing."

Because the staff at the study schools understood the developmental and academic needs of middle-grade students, they made caring a priority. This care was evident in the language and interactions of school staff and students. The staff at the study schools provided opportunities to

build caring relationships because they recognized that if students felt comfortable and cared for, they would be more academically motivated.

Maintaining a Common Purpose Through Pride

In the study schools, a focus on high expectations for all contributed to improved student performance. This improved performance inspired personal pride and generated internal and external recognition, which in turn, motivated the school communities to continue to progress.

As teachers experienced success, they felt proud of their efforts. Teachers described feeling proud when they realized their hard work had paid off and they could see "light bulbs going off in these kids' brains" (Hambrick Middle School). Similarly, when the principals at the schools talked about the teachers as successful professionals doing their jobs well, they felt proud. This positive reinforcement motivated and affirmed teachers at these schools.

Competition within and between schools also promoted pride for both staff and students. Teachers from Hambrick Middle School talked about a healthy spirit of competition between the school's grade-level teams. A Memorial Junior High School teacher expressed that "a friendly competition between the teams" was important to improvements in student performance.

Staff members wanted to share their successes with others. Staff from Pocomoke Middle School, Tonasket Middle School, and JFK Middle School specifically described feeling proud of their accomplishments and wanting to show the surrounding community that their children were capable. JFK Middle School teachers, for example, liked to talk about the "wonderful things" happening at their schools and were eager to put the school "in the community in a positive light."

Recognition by the outside community also promoted staff pride. Teachers were proud when high school teachers told them how well prepared their students were. Teachers stated that they were especially proud when they got positive feedback from practitioners in other settings, such as at conferences or professional development workshops. Staff from Rockcastle County Middle School talked about situations in which others approached them to find out why their school performed so well: "When I go to meetings now, they look for me. And they want to talk to me about what we've done." The Title I director at Tonasket Middle School proudly talked about the fact that a parent called in from out of district to say, "I hear you have such a good school over there that we're going to move over there." Other schools have received statewide recognition for their hard work. For example, Memorial Junior High School and Hambrick Middle School have both been acknowledged by private organizations for their student performance. Inman Middle School was recognized as one of the top five middle schools in the state of Georgia.

These schools were proud of being recognized. Recognition and competition served as motivators for improving student performance. School staff took great satisfaction in the reputation they developed through a commitment to high expectations for all.

Reaching a Common Purpose Through Hard Work

Maintaining a common focus on high expectations for all took work and commitment. Staff at the study schools viewed themselves as hardworking: "It's a lot of hard work and we don't give up . . . . [We have] a lot of commitment and we expect a lot" (Hambrick Middle School). For some schools, such as Inman Middle School, hard work was as much a part of who the teachers considered themselves to be as was their commitment to high expectations. A teacher in the focus group explained how

> The teachers continue to blow me away with their commitment and hard work. . . . I mean, you have to bust your behind and everybody does. . . . It's like you would feel weird if you were here and you weren't working hard.

Teachers were willing to work hard because they learned that their efforts achieved the results they wanted. This reinforcement created a kind of achievement momentum that made them want to continue working. At JFK Middle School, a teacher described this environment:

> It was hard work. And it wasn't fun but we saw some results. And the more results we saw, the more you'd roll up your sleeves and try a little harder. It just became one little success begot another success.

The hard work these schools exhibited helped them maintain their focus on high expectations for all students. Their commitment was a testament to the difficulty of improving student performance. It was also a testament to fact that it can be accomplished.

The schools in this study were driven to succeed and driven by high expectations for all students. The staff cared about their students and took pride in improving student achievement. They were committed to working hard to maintain high expectations and ensure that all students learn.

Challenges to Maintaining High Expectations for All

Literature suggests that middle schools struggle with the need to strike a balance between a focus on achieving high academic standards and on meeting the developmental needs of adolescents (Norton and Lewis 2000). Within our sample of seven schools, most schools emphasized academic needs over developmental needs, but some still struggled over how to create a healthy balance. Additionally, some of the academically focused schools in the study placed greater emphasis on higher-level skills while others focused more on helping all students reach more basic-level skills.

In some of the study schools that struggled to balance these different needs, the students had very little non-academic time. Their days were filled with intense, academically focused classes. Some staff members at these schools expressed concern about the impact this intensity had on students. A counselor at one school felt that the students did not have any downtime and were overwhelmed. Such intense environments made it difficult to pay attention to students' developmental needs.

Another challenge these schools faced was how to determine what defines high expectations. Some schools were able to set the bar for what constitutes high standards far above what is minimally set by the state, while other schools still wrestled with meeting minimum requirements. In these cases, minimal expectations set by the state were considered high expectations by staff and students. Both staff and students worked diligently to meet these standards but were not yet able to go beyond them. These schools struggled because they had large numbers of students who still needed support to meet minimum standards.

In some schools, attention was devoted to ensuring that all students were provided access to rigorous coursework. These schools made efforts to improve equity with respect to such things as who enrolled in Algebra I in the eighth grade and who participated in gifted and talented programs. At other schools, higher-level material was not yet an equity focus. These schools offered a limited number of advanced-level classes. For example, special needs students may have been included in target student performance benchmarks, but improving their enrollment in higher-level coursework had not yet become a focus.

Dedicated to Collaborative Environments

School staff collaborated with many entities, from each other to outside agencies, in many different capacities. Some of these collaborations were minimal, while others were extensive and created an opportunity for people to frequently share information and concerns. Three types of strong collaboration emerged from the seven study schools: collaborating in schools, collaborating in districts, and collaborating with outside agencies.

Collaborating in Schools

At the study schools, staff felt that they were involved in decision making and empowered to make change. According to one teacher at Inman Middle School, "We're really big on shared decision making . . . everyone feels comfortable with just expressing how they feel." A Tonasket Middle School teacher shared how there was "a real sense of . . . empowerment. A real sense of being able to do what you want and what's right for kids." This belief was reflected in the style of governance at these campuses. Teachers in several of these schools used the word "democratic" to describe how decisions were made at their individual campuses. One teacher from Hambrick Middle School described this non-hierarchical power relationship and the sharing of authority as: "We literally have 149 administrators. It's amazing! We all work as a team to make sure that each child can achieve their potential."

Teachers in these schools were not hampered by an excessive number of external rules and directives. They tended to make decisions that related directly to their teaching and their personal growth. Almost 80 percent of the teachers who responded to the survey felt that they had control over content and pedagogy, and over 70 percent felt that they had influence on the professional development they attended (Teacher Survey). A mathematics teacher at Inman Middle School described a common attitude held by teachers throughout the study schools:

> [Our school is] not run like the average school in the system. The teachers have a large amount of autonomy. In other words, [the administrators] say, "You're in the classroom, you know what's best for these students. You know what works in your classroom . . . . Do it."

A teacher at Tonasket Middle School explained how the reciprocal relationship between the teachers and the administration "develops a sense of trust and it kind of gives people the okay to feel like they're putting their effort in and it's going to be valued and worth their effort. And I don't know if you can measure how important that is." This widespread participation and trust created environments where staff understood the boundaries of their authority and the processes of decision making. For example, a Pocomoke Middle School teacher described how:

> [The principal] has done a good job of . . . saying "I'm open to certain things." At the same time she'll make the final decision. . . . I feel like if we have something reasonable that makes sense, it will be seriously considered. So I think that makes it more exciting to be here because you feel like you can . . . actually do something about [problems that arise].

Participation increased buy-in and helped reduce conflict. A teacher at Tonasket Middle School explained that

> I may not totally agree with something, but yet because we've agreed on it as a staff as being important to our curriculum, we agree to teach that. And I think that's important; it's a buy-in. It's a buy-in and a trust.

Having strong participation in campus planning was one way to reach this goal. Five out of the seven campuses had a strong school improvement planning process with extensive staff involvement. In some cases, parents, district personnel, outside agency representatives, and students were involved. As the ex-principal at Pocomoke Middle School explained, conflict was reduced because as "more staff members have become involved in the writing of the SIP [School Improvement Plan], you get greater buy-in from the staff and that helps with a common language." Processes were also in place to reduce interpersonal conflict. For example at Memorial Junior High School teachers were surveyed to determine their feelings about the effectiveness of their team and their relationships with their coworkers, and they had the option to change teams if there was unhealthy friction.

Inclusion of staff in collaborative efforts and decision making was achieved through informal and formal structures. At Hambrick Middle School, almost all of the adults working at the school were in the halls during transition time, before and after school, and during lunch. Staff used these short blocks of time to share ideas and information. At Tonasket Middle School, the entire teaching staff ate lunch together daily. These schools tended to have a general open-door culture. Teachers, administrators, counselors, aides, and custodial staff wandered in and out of each other's classrooms and offices as needed. This was also true for most of the principals, who used what Evans (2001) called "informal outreach rather than formal structure" (p. 247). One JFK Middle School teacher described both literally and metaphorically that the "open door between leadership and teachers is so important."

A variety of formal structures were used to aid in campuswide collaboration, including meetings, the distribution of reading materials by way of staff mail boxes, staff development sessions, and participation on committees. In most of these schools, teachers identified the team meeting (common planning period) as the focal point for most of the communication that occurred at their schools. Team meetings were part of a network of collaboration. Not only did teachers meet with each other, but these meetings provided administrators, counselors, and lead teachers easy access to small groups of teachers during the school day. At most campuses, faculty meetings were conducted on an as-needed basis. A staff member at Hambrick Middle School explained how "We might have one faculty meeting a year after school. But we have many meetings through teams." Further strengthening this network were meetings between team leaders, academic department heads, and academic meetings with teachers throughout the district.

Collaborative processes were also enhanced through committees. For example, Inman Middle School had a group responsible for student transitions in and out of the school. Pocomoke Middle School had a social committee and one dedicated to family involvement. Tonasket Middle School had a group of teachers that focused on staff development. Membership in these groups tended to be voluntary. A Tonasket Middle School teacher explained how "We meet as a staff and then [the principal] will say, 'who wants to be on this committee to work on this?' And it's strictly a volunteer [system]—who has an interest in it."

Collaborating in Districts

These schools had a range of relationships with other schools within their district and with their central offices. In some cases, strong collaboration was an important factor in increased

student performance. In other cases, schools took advantage of the minimal amount of involvement they had with the district in ways that also enhanced teaching and learning.

There was wide variability in the number of meetings teachers had with their curricular counterparts at other schools. Groups of teachers from Memorial Junior High School met monthly with staff from the feeder schools. Other campuses met vertically[10] when needs arose, such as around curriculum alignment or textbook selection. JFK Middle School staff met once a year with district representatives and teachers from other schools to vertically align the curriculum during the summer intersession.

The level of collaboration between each of the study schools and its district office varied from having a close relationship to one that is fairly autonomous. At Inman Middle School, the central office tended to leave the school alone. This hands-off approach freed the school from district-led reforms and initiatives that may not have matched the school's objectives, and gave school leaders and staff the opportunity to make instructional and resource use decisions they felt were in the school's best interests. In most of these districts, the central offices exhibited trust in school staff, had a common understanding of what needed to be done, and played a supportive role instead of mandating policies and requiring compliance. A Rockcastle County district representative explained how this support worked:

> And I think now it's more, instead of saying this is what we have to do for you, it is going to the schools and asking, "what can we do for you?" And then as we determine what schools need, then we try to look for resources and leverage resources, whether it be grant money or people as consultants, and all those kinds of things.

At Memorial Junior High School and Pocomoke Middle School, the districts worked closely with the school staff during the planning process, providing assistance when needed on budgetary and program sections of the school's improvement plan.

Tonasket Middle School provided an example of complete integration. Partly because of their size and the location of the elementary, middle, and high schools all on one campus and partly based on a history of strong interactions, Tonasket Middle School's district personnel were integrated into the daily operations of the schools. They attended faculty and group meetings and were involved in many decisions regarding the school. In turn, teachers from the school were able to walk over to the district office for information and to provide input into major district policies involving such key issues as staffing and organizational structures. In addition, decisions made at the district level were made with all three schools (elementary, middle, and high) in mind. This tight integration maximized resource utilization and ensured wide input into decisions that affected the campus.

Collaborating with Outside Entities

Some of these schools had networks in place with external entities such as nonprofit organizations and college institutions to gain additional support. These relationships provided additional student services beyond the capacity of the schools. Rockcastle County Middle School opened itself up to working with outside partners and allowing them to participate in decisions

[10] *Vertical* refers to the practice of teachers in the same subject from different grade levels meeting with each other to plan and coordinate their work. These meetings often focus on aligning curriculum across schools.

regarding the policies and practices at the school. A teacher shared how the school was not "afraid to let people come in and help us or give us new ideas." The school had representatives from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program and GEAR UP[11] programs on site. The coordinators of these two programs shared resources and were involved in the campus planning process. Rockcastle County Middle School also had relationships with local colleges and universities which provided technical assistance with grant writing, professional development, and student teachers. Finally, consultants from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) helped decide what to teach and how to teach by assisting with curriculum alignment and content knowledge training.

Inman Middle School had several partnerships with outside agencies including the Boys and Girls Club, a program called Hands on Atlanta that provides after-school tutoring, and a student mentoring program where for one year professionals commit to spend one hour a week with a student as their advocates. Over 120 adults volunteered to support individual students in whatever capacity was needed, whether it be someone to listen to them or someone to help them with their homework. At JFK Middle School, staff worked with a local college to provide a work study program where ninth-graders were exposed to real-world situations by participating in a shadowing program in which they spent several weeks in a community workplace.

In order to maximize the benefits of collaborating with outside agencies, personnel in these schools and districts put into place processes to increase the interaction between school staff and outside agencies, and in one case, between representatives from the outside agencies themselves. The district curriculum advisor at Rockcastle County Middle School explained the importance of this coordination:

> All these people needed to be communicating so that they were not duplicating [and] there were not unnecessary gaps. So we got the people with the different grants and initiatives together and we talked about where we were, and we talked about how they could complement each other. . . . And that has been a key effort to bring people together and let them talk.

District personnel arranged a retreat and meeting times for school and outside agency staff to talk about what services were being offered by whom. They carefully created a consolidated needs plan so that services would not be duplicated.

Many staff members in these schools understood that they had limited resources to provide all of the services they deemed necessary to achieve the goal of having all students meet high expectations. They opened themselves up to the concept of allowing outsiders into their community to expand the opportunities for their students. They also worked hard to organize these disparate outside agencies to ensure that they worked together to provide the maximum benefit to students.

None of these schools had a closed-door culture where teachers worked in isolation. Educators in all of these school communities understood the power of working together, of sharing decisions, and opening up their minds to having outsiders help. Collaboration was not forced upon them; they naturally sought the support and expertise of those they knew could help them serve the students. This support could be from a neighbor teacher, the administrator down the hall, a teacher

[11] GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a part of the 1998 *Amendments to Higher Education Act*. The mission of GEAR UP is to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. For more information see www.ed.gov/gearup/; www.ed.gov/legislation/HEA/sec403.html.

at another school, a central office representative, a person from an outside agency, or a community member. School staff understood that through collaboration they could more fully achieve their goal of increased student achievement.

Challenges to Establishing a Collaborative Environment

Achieving professional autonomy at all levels was a challenging process. Problems were exacerbated by the nature of the school organization and the fact that multiple stakeholders were involved. Four obstacles were predominant in keeping some of these schools and districts from collaborating in a way that enhanced productivity and gave all people involved a strong sense of efficacy.

First, creating an environment where people worked together well required foresight and planning. Most of these schools used some kind of model where teachers worked in small teams. In general, the people on these teams worked well together and tended to have strong collegial and personal ties. However, in some schools the increased responsibility given to teachers created some problems. There were instances of people having difficulty working together. For example, one teacher said,

> This was not easy. It took us years to learn how to work with other teachers. The first year was very difficult, just learning to listen to five different opinions and not leave the team planning period very upset at each other. But once we learned to do that, it is tremendous.

Second, state accountability tests and academic standards put pressure on local control and decision making. At several of these schools, some of the staff found it difficult to voice their opinions and to express alternate views about possible curricular directions their schools could head in as a reaction to state-mandated standards. Teachers at a few schools shared sentiments and frustrations similar to this teacher's:

> The people that do speak up don't feel like they're being really heard. And I think that's why so many don't speak up. It seems kind of like there's a vision right now administratively, and I think it's probably coming from the [district] as well. I don't think that our principal is totally to blame. And it's testing-driven, data-driven, and they're not going to hear anything else but that. So we're kind of in this boat and don't have a choice.

Third, some central office personnel and school administrators adhered to a more hierarchical model of authority, mandating changes and expecting compliance. In one district, the central office mandated block scheduling for the school without consulting the teachers. The reform met with stiff resistance from many of the teachers and sparked a lawsuit. At another school, the district made severe cuts in personnel that seriously affected how the school operated.

Finally, both school staff and parents expressed the need for improved parental involvement. In most of these schools, there was little interaction between the school and parents outside of normal events such as parent-teacher conferences and special events such as band concerts. One parent confirmed that unless there was a ballgame, parents did not come to the school. Only one school had a strong parent-teacher association. Although all of these schools had a site-based management team, parent participation tended to be fairly weak, and when it did occur, it was dominated by one or two parents. All of these schools had an open-door policy for parents and

expressed a strong commitment to increasing the parental participation levels, but only one of them had succeeded in reaching its objectives so far.

Despite the challenges of creating and maintaining effective relationships, the schools continue to improve and refine their decision making processes to expand the number of stakeholders who participate.

Guided by Practices and Strategies That Support Teaching and Learning

The study schools consistently enacted strategies and practices to ensure they met their high expectations for all students. Sometimes, these strategies and practices were part of larger plans and other times they were isolated programs or policies established to meet specific needs. Strategies and practices that contributed to the support of teaching and students' learning fall into two categories: organizational structures and capacity building.

Choosing Thoughtful Organizationai Structures

Thoughtful organizational structures address the unique developmental and academic needs of middle-grades students. Most of the study schools used research-based ideas of effective middle school organizational structures and practices. The study schools chose to implement these structures and practices because it made the most sense for their individual settings and addressed issues specific to these settings and needs of this age group. Schools spent time deciding which practices would most help them improve student performance. Most of these schools provided localized student teams, common planning time for teams of teachers, block scheduling, and practices that promoted appropriate student behavior.

Student Teams

Six of the seven schools grouped students and teachers into grade-level teams. This created smaller, more intimate settings. It built a team identity to which students could belong. The team model also allowed teachers to create in-depth knowledge of students. The study schools realized that these benefits of teaming also addressed the developmental and academic needs of students.

Teaming helped the middle school setting become more intimate. Some of these schools had close to a thousand students, which made it difficult for students to feel a sense of belonging and created a challenge for teachers to know their students well. With the campus divided into "schools within schools," students had daily interactions with a subset of the entire school population. This intimacy provided students with a less intimidating middle school experience and created a stronger sense of belonging.

In many study schools, each of these teams had its own identity enhanced by having a name such as The Dream Team or The Princeton Tigers. On specific days, the entire team, including the teacher, wore a team t-shirt. At some schools, competitions such as lunch-time intramural sports programs and competition over state assessment scores also contributed to a team identity and students' sense of belonging. Identification with a team helped students feel safe and comfortable. By meeting this developmental need, schools could provide students more opportunity to focus on academics.

The team structure ensured that students were well known by the teachers on their team. Teachers benefited from the smaller arrangement because they had more opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the students' abilities. The team created an academic and emotional safety net that helped teachers identify issues early on before they developed into problems that would be more difficult to resolve later. This intimate knowledge of individual students also ensured that

student strengths and weaknesses were known by each of the teachers on the team. A teacher at Memorial Junior High School explained how this benefited the students:

> We see a different side of students. I may have someone who's not comfortable with science and I cannot get that child to perform at all. [Teachers] sit down and I'll find out that they're awesome in [another subject area]. It's usually, if they're not good in science, it's the language arts where they excel. And they'll show me examples and I'll think, "oh, this child can write?" I didn't even know they could write. Because they won't for me but they will for their language arts [teacher]. So you get to see different sides of the students.

Teachers were able to discuss behavioral issues about individual students with all of the student's teachers. This created a situation where the teachers tended to address discipline issues instead of sending the student to the front office. A Rockcastle County Middle School teacher shared how, "We stick together. We handle discipline problems with our team. We back each other up. We don't always agree, but we back each other up." A teacher at Memorial Junior High School explained how this system helped solve discipline problems and reduced the involvement of the administrators in student discipline issues:

> Before, we didn't have team teaching and teachers were pretty much on their own, you know? If we had discipline problems, we had to rely on the principal or the assistant principal and at times they were busy and the kid was sent back to the classroom and so the problem was not solved.

Students also saw the benefits of having smaller teams where they could get to know their teachers better. Many students stated that knowing their teachers and knowing that the teachers cared about them would be something they would miss when they want to a larger high school. A Rockcastle County Middle School student shared how

> I think. . . the teachers [in high school] are going to have so many kids going through, you probably won't have very much time to get to know them as good as you can . . . the teachers here in middle school. So that's probably what I'll miss the most.

Other students repeated similar comments across campuses, indicating that the close relationships they built with teachers affected them in a positive way. A student from Inman Middle School shared, "I really like them because they're always there for me when I need somebody. They would explain every subject to me and I want those kinds of teachers."

Common Planning Time for Teachers

Research suggests that the personnel of successful high-poverty elementary schools spend a considerable amount of time collaborating around instructional issues (Lein, Johnson, and Ragland 1997). Research focused on high-performing middle schools has similarly highlighted the impact of instructionally focused collaboration between teachers. For example, a study of the Michigan Middle School Initiative noted that student achievement in reading and mathematics improved in schools where teachers were provided weekly common planning time (Jackson and Davis 2000).

In all of the study schools, schedules were arranged so that grade-level team teachers shared a common planning time. Common planning periods proved invaluable for both student academic

and developmental needs. Teachers and administrators at these schools took time to plan together, discuss instructional and developmental problems, and help each other improve instructional practice. Issues around standards, learning expectations, curricular materials, assessment strategies, and teaching techniques were part of the regular conversation among these educators. As a result, a JFK teacher explained "You're on the same page and you just feel like . . . you're all part of the same team trying to do the same thing."

Common planning periods created a capacity for flexibility and problem solving. For example, if a whole class had difficulty with a particular concept, a teacher could address this issue with other content teachers to come up with a new approach. Often, concepts were addressed across disciplines so that students were exposed to material by different teachers and in different ways. Additionally, if teachers had concerns about a student's academic or developmental progress, the team of teachers shared information and created a solution together based on collected ideas. A Tonasket Middle School teacher illustrated this point: "So we're always talking about what we need to do for this student; are you having trouble with this student; how can we benefit this student; what do we need to do to make him succeed."

A further benefit of having a common planning time in conjunction with teaming was that it provided an opportunity for all of a student's teachers to meet together with a student's parents. Parents heard multiple perspectives about their child's performance and what the team was doing as a group to meet their child's needs.

Block Scheduling

Five of the seven schools used some variation of block scheduling. Generally, each day consisted of four one-and-one-half-hour blocks of time and a 40-minute lunch period. Typically, students attended four classes one day and the other four the next day. At several schools, students took language arts and mathematics every day. Research on block scheduling has shown that if the model is implemented with the proper teacher training and support, it can improve school climate, student attendance, and achievement (Rettig and Canady 1999). The main benefit of this arrangement for teachers was that they had more time for in-depth teaching. According to a teacher at Hambrick Middle School, "With a 50-minute class, you wouldn't have that time [to cover a lesson]." Teachers tended to break up the blocks into a series of activities. For example, a teacher at Tonasket Middle School explained that she reviewed previous material, introduced new material while the students took notes, provided time for them to do research by reading books or watching video segments, and had the students work in groups or individually on projects. Another Tonasket Middle School teacher explained how these blocks of time gave the teacher the flexibility to take advantage of the students' productivity and make adjustments depending on their understanding and interest level:

> I've got three or four things I want to do during that period. And the nice thing about that is that [if] they're getting frustrated . . . [you can] save it for tomorrow. And let's go on to this next thing I have. . . . You've got the freedom to do what you want and also, the block schedule gives you the freedom to adjust the times and you just kind of read the class.

Teachers were also given more time to plan and discuss student needs during their planning time because of the longer periods. A teacher at Memorial Junior High School shared how, "[In the past] you had your [45-minute] conference period, the conference would slide by. But now with the blocking, you have an hour and 30 minutes of your personal conference [one day]. And you have an

hour and thirty minutes for your team [the next day]." One team at Memorial Junior High School took advantage of the extended team meetings to visit parents at home or at their workplace.

According to staff at these schools, block scheduling also had a positive impact on discipline. As a Memorial Junior High School teacher explained, "The block schedule has helped a lot also with the discipline and tardies, because the kids are not out in the hall as much as if they would be changing classes six, seven times."

Appropriate Student Behavior Strategies

Many school staff described the importance of thoughtful attention to appropriate student behavior for middle school success. JFK Middle School and Inman Middle school consistently used structured plans that were carefully created to promote positive student behavior. These plans clearly outlined expectations for students. Having this structure in place and enforcing it reduced distractions from learning. Particular attention was paid to transitions, that is, times when the students were in the halls before and after school and between classes. School staff viewed these as time when many infractions occurred. A common strategy at most of these schools was to have a large and visible adult presence. Teachers, administrators, counselors, aides, and custodians all came into the halls between classes. They talked to the students and each other, and made sure that students were headed in the right direction and got to class on time. In addition, these schools took care of a significant number of their discipline problems by using organizational modifications like teaming and block scheduling.

The schools that used teaming placed students in classrooms within close proximity to one another. This provided a variety of advantages, the most obvious of which was that students did not have to walk a great distance to move from one class to the next, reducing the traffic flow and the number of students in each hallway during transitions. Many of the schools eliminated using bells. Teachers and students were aware of the time, and when classes finished, students packed up and walked to a nearby classroom with much less of the chaos and confusion usually associated with transition times. Hambrick Middle School took advantage of this proximity and no longer used lockers. Students were able to carry what they needed from classroom to classroom, further reducing the noise and confusion of transition times. At Memorial Junior High School, each team had a hall pass of a particular color, making it easy to spot a student in a part of the building where they did not belong.

Having grade-level teams located in a specific area of the building created a situation where the younger students had few interactions with the older students. That is, the sixth-graders would be placed as far away as possible from the eighth-graders. School personnel felt this was important because of the developmental differences between these age groups. Schools also took advantage of the location of the teams by staggering the time that groups moved. For assemblies and at the end of the school day, many of these schools announced over their public address system which teams should enter the hallway at a particular time to move across campus or leave for the day.

The study schools offered examples of how to implement structural changes thoughtfully and carefully with attention to the developmental and academic needs of middle-grade students. These schools considered the needs of students when deciding how to structure time and space. The choices they made reflect an understanding of the unique issues educating this age group presents.

Building the Capacity of the System

These schools recognized that building the capacity of the school system is a wise investment. Building capacity can ensure that the school keeps its infrastructure despite changes in the staff and student body. For these schools, it meant developing specific strategies that enabled

them to make informed decisions in their daily efforts to improve student learning. The use of data to focus curriculum and instruction and investment in ongoing professional development were ways these schools effectively built their capacity.

Data Use

Lein, Johnson, and Ragland (1997) found that in successful high-poverty elementary schools curriculum and instruction were focused toward getting every student to reach challenging academic goals. Schools tended to make decisions about curricular and instructional issues based on careful consideration of student achievement data. Curricular decisions had less to do with tradition, fad, or politics and more to do with data that reflected success in getting students to achieve learning objectives. Thus, if approaches were not working to achieve the desired objectives, they were often modified, supplemented, or eliminated.

The schools in this study all used data to determine areas of need. The schools developed systems to ensure staff understood how to make data meaningful. They also had a process for how data was used to define target areas requiring more services. These two strategies combined to create an infrastructure of school knowledge that was independent of staff.

School staff received extensive training on how to make the data meaningful. This training came from a variety of providers. In some schools, the district supported data training. Other schools hired outside consultants to provide additional help. The District Curriculum Specialist for the Rockcastle County schools explained how they brought people in to "talk about where the data says we are, and where we think we want to go, and how are we going to get there." Teachers and school staff were taught how to disaggregate data into components that indicated specific areas of need.

Both administrative and teaching staff used student data in their decision making about how to focus their curriculum and instruction. Analyzing data became a daily practice at some schools. Accordingly, a teacher at Inman Middle School stated, "We are constantly statistically analyzing ourselves." A variety of data were used, including test data, referral data, discipline data, and attendance data. Teachers shared many incidents where data drove them to action. For example, through analysis of test scores, teachers at Tonasket Middle School discovered that students needed additional practice in reading graphs and started to focus on this area across subjects. At Memorial Junior High School, analysis of data showed the need to improve students' reading abilities. So the staff put a variety of processes into place for improving reading instruction. For example, to increase the amount of time that students spent reading books in school each day, the mathematics, science, social studies, and elective teachers would devote one period a week to reading. Even with this increased emphasis on reading, students made slow progress with their reading skills. To further increase attention on reading, the school reallocated Title I funds to purchase a computer-based reading program, books for the library, rewards for the students, and a networked computer for each of the reading classrooms. This focus on reading instruction and repeated skill assessments became very intense, but it paid off. Students made gains in their reading test scores.

In addition to using state assessment data, schools also generated their own data through benchmark testing. Many study schools administered regular student assessments to document how well students were progressing on designated content and skills. Generally, school principals monitored data closely. At JFK Middle School, the principal asked teachers on a weekly basis to document all the services they made available for students who were experiencing difficulties and to document how far students had progressed.

Schools not only examined current data, but took advantage of longitudinal data. Tonasket Middle School and Pocomoke Middle School, for example, obtained the elementary school test data of sixth-graders. Teachers used this information to analyze the skill level of each incoming student.

They were then able to emphasize certain areas and to lay a strong foundation on which students could build as they moved through the grades.

Data was also used to address non-academic issues that affected student performance. At Inman Middle School, teachers discovered that several students who lacked basic school supplies and were scoring poorly on assessments shared the same address in a government housing complex. The staff contacted the Boys and Girls Club serving those students and enlisted their help in providing the students and their families with basic social services and school supplies.

The study schools used data to build capacity that supported improved academic performance. Data use contributed to the institutional knowledge of the schools and existed independent of faculty. It guided the study schools through informed decision making.

Ongoing and Tailored Professional Development

Research suggests that a school's approach to professional development is of paramount importance; it is most effective when tied to student improvement, linked with standards, and integrated into teachers' daily work (Sparks 1997; SREB 1998). Experts emphasize the need to increase both the pedagogical and content knowledge of teachers. Teachers with a richer understanding of their subject area and a richer understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds learn will be the best prepared to implement successful practices.

Most of the study schools made a considerable investment in developing the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality content and instruction. Teachers were given responsibility for identifying what they needed to improve themselves. Three quarters of the teachers surveyed stated that their own assessment of their needs and interests considerably influenced their professional development (Teacher Survey). At Pocomoke Middle School, like all the study schools, this sort of flexibility meant that teachers had tremendous freedom in choosing professional development that met their needs. The principal saw the importance of this freedom as parallel to how she encouraged teachers to work with students:

> We have been moving very much into promoting differentiated instruction in the classroom. So I came to this job thinking, "Well, it's not quite fair to tell teachers to differentiate. . . . If I have a veteran teacher who is an excellent classroom manager sit through a classroom management in-service, I've pretty much wasted their time."

In an effort to improve their choices, one teacher recommended that the school add teacher-led study groups to the list of professional development options, so that teachers could focus more in-depth on a particular area of interest over the course of an entire year. This was something the school planned to incorporate the year following this study's site visits.

Many of these schools were parting from traditional professional development, focusing on more in-depth and ongoing professional development rather than one-time workshops. The study schools found ways to provide more in-depth training by sending staff members for special training, creatively using district resources, or hiring consultants. For example, teachers at Rockcastle County Middle School identified a need for training in how to best improve student writing. Because portfolio writing was part of the state-required exam and students' writing scores were low, the middle school formed a partnership with a University of Kentucky writing professor. All teachers, regardless of subject area, took his semester-long class on how to develop students' writing. Teachers worked from their own student writing samples in the class. At Tonasket Middle School, a teacher noticed a need to standardize how teachers approached teaching essay writing. This individual developed a method that he introduced to his colleagues during in-service and early release days. He made a presentation supported with sample lessons. He then provided teachers with

starter lessons that could be applied across subject areas. Once teachers had the materials they needed, he was given the time to go into teachers' classrooms and either model lessons for them or observe their instruction until staff felt comfortable with the new methods. This method was so effective that both the elementary school and the high school began using it as a primary method for teaching essay writing.

Most study schools had a designated staff member or members as in-house curriculum specialists. These staff either had no teaching assignments or reduced teaching assignments. Their primary responsibility was to support teachers. The curriculum specialists attended workshops and culled information that fit the needs of their staff. They then brought this information back to the campus and shared it with their colleagues. This eliminated the need for teachers to take time away from their duties to attend workshops while still getting them the information they needed. The curriculum specialists were able to have daily discussions with teachers around their specific needs. They were expected to observe classes regularly and discuss teachers' content and instructional choices. They were also available to model lessons and provide curriculum resources.

Some schools, like Pocomoke Middle School and Inman Middle School, provided teachers time to visit one another's classrooms and discuss what they observed so they could learn from each other. Teachers at JFK Middle School also used peer coaching as a professional development tool. Each teacher was paired with someone from a different department. Throughout the year, they observed each other's classrooms and focused on certain domains they wanted to improve, such as lesson delivery. After the observation, they discussed ways to improve. One teacher stated

> It's so wonderful to be able to discuss with your coworker things that are working and things that are not, and to have the other person so receptive and willing to hear [that they] have to do a better job this year without hesitation.

Teaming was another way teachers at these schools engaged in capacity building. During common planning times, teachers were able to share strategies and ideas that had helped them be successful with their students. This exchange of information was ongoing and very specific to the students they taught. At Memorial Junior High School common planning time also allowed for collaboration and for the integration of curriculum. One teacher explained,

> We try to pretty much work to where we're all doing the same thing. And this is also an excellent time, because we get to share ideas. And if something worked for me, and I thought it was great, then I get to share it with the rest of the teachers. And the same thing goes for them. If they presented a lesson and it worked out really great for them and the kids were able to understand it and do well with it, then we incorporate it into ours.

While teaming may not be considered a formal method of professional development, teachers viewed it as a tool for improving their delivery of high-quality content and instruction.

These teachers and schools had tremendous freedom to determine what they most needed to improve their curriculum and instruction. The schools invested in developing teachers' content and instructional knowledge and closely aligned professional development efforts with the identified needs of their students. Through this investment in teachers, schools were better able to help students improve their academic performance.

Challenges to Implementing Practices That Support Teaching and Learning

While most schools shared the intention of fully supporting teaching and learning, some situations prevented the full realization of this goal. The study schools came to understand that simply implementing a strategy without the necessary support would not result in improved student performance. Practices and strategies needed to be implemented in thoughtful ways with respect to the individual settings of each school.

Common planning time, while essential in concept at most all schools, was implemented with varying levels of success. In one school, the staff was so familiar with the curriculum and had so much teaching experience that while teachers had common planning time, it played a less critical role than it had in the school's early stages of improving student performance. At another school, while common planning time allowed teachers the opportunity to meet as a group with parents to discuss student issues, a few parents viewed this as intimidating and a way for school personnel to further alienate parents because it would be one parent against a team of teachers. Alienating parents was certainly not an overt intention of any staff, but this criticism cannot be overlooked or minimized.

Not all schools used block scheduling. In one case, the teachers preferred traditional scheduling over block scheduling because of comfort and familiarity with lesson development and implementation. Under block scheduling, the school experienced more inappropriate student behavior, especially during the last fifteen minutes of each block. Implementing block scheduling without the necessary teacher training did not improve student performance.

In the context of state accountability systems, using data to identify campus needs was an essential tool in improving student progress. However, a few schools struggled to find a balance between offering an academically rigorous curriculum and narrowing the curriculum to focus only on the more basic content emphasized by the state standards. At these schools, the staff chose to focus mainly on state standards at the expense of richer curriculum and instruction. Some of these campuses felt the testing system had taken on too prominent a role at the expense of teaching meaningful content. The use of data to identify areas of weakness, in one case, also led the school to implement what some at the campus considered an excessive testing program, using state-, district-, and school-created assessments as benchmarks. The assessments were not aligned with state standards and therefore, teachers struggled to make meaning of conflicting requirements.

Common to the challenges faced by all the study schools were that staff understood and acknowledged these struggles. They also understood that simply making organizational or structural changes without the proper training and support would not lead to improved student performance. While staff had not yet resolved these issues, they were aware of them and wrestling to find thoughtful solutions.

Attentive to Individual Students

A strong and consistent feature of each of these seven schools was their commitment to holding students to high standards by attending to them on an individual basis. These seven schools stood apart from other schools ***not*** because they had teachers who were willing to give students additional time. Teachers do this every day in schools across the country. But in these schools, specific strategies were developed to ensure that all students received the additional attention they needed to accomplish high levels of achievement. These schools had systems in place to make sure students were known by adults. They also had systems to identify students who were in danger of failure so that additional academic supports could be provided. Students had opportunities to attend after-school programs that were both academically and non-academically oriented and to attain

additional academic instruction in areas of need during the school day. Additionally, school staff provided transition programs to help students adjust to middle school.

Building Relationships with Students

The staff at these schools structured days so they had time to build relationships with students on an individual basis. Sometimes this was done through interdisciplinary teams, sometimes through formal mentoring arrangements, and sometimes through teachers simply making themselves available to students on a consistent basis. A Memorial Junior High School teacher explained how they ensure they get to know students within the team framework:

> Every Friday that we have an A day . . . we have a BARK meeting—we call it a BARK meeting, because we're the Bulldogs. And we pick 10 kids—10 or 12 kids from the team that we don't know. And we bring them in and we have a little get together with them. We give them a little snack and we talk to them about . . . what they like about the team, what they don't like, what . . . things that they want to do, [they] tell us about themselves.

Several schools had specific mentoring programs to make sure that students, especially struggling students, had at least one adult on campus with whom they could build a close relationship. At Rockcastle County Middle School, this was done through writing portfolios. Each teacher at Rockcastle County Middle School took responsibility for mentoring six students with whom they worked intensively as they built a portfolio of the students' written work. The curriculum specialist noted that this system helped teachers build "closer relationships" with students as they had the opportunity to work one-on-one. At Hambrick Middle School, a program called Students Need a Pat and a Push (SNAPP) paired struggling students with faculty members who gave them individual attention and also helped them maintain high expectations for themselves.

Extending the School Day

These schools also recognized that in order for them to achieve their goal of each student attaining academic success, they had to provide students with additional resources, typically in the form of services extending beyond the regular school day. These schools were systematic in their approach to providing these services, both in the way they identified students and in the way they worked together to ensure that sufficient programs were available to meet the needs of all students. In addition, before- and after-school tutoring programs provided students both academic and developmental growth opportunities as well as a sense of belonging to the school.

Academic Supports

Staff members gave significant amounts of their time, both before and after school to students who needed additional help with coursework. At several schools, the team structure helped staff members coordinate after-school activities so that someone from each subject was available each day. A mathematics teacher from Inman Middle School explained how their school had to modify their tutoring services to ensure that all students who needed to attend were able to do so:

> Everybody was required [in the past] to have Mondays [as] after-school tutorial. . . . Since then, we've noticed that there has been a conflict with some students [who] need to get help in two or three areas. And so now . . . the teachers on each

> particular team [are] getting together and deciding what days they're going to have their after-school tutorial.

When students were not receiving the services they needed, efforts were made to be sure they did. The Hambrick Middle School principal recalled a particular student who was not attending tutoring. She explained how staff members teamed up to make sure this student would take advantage of the tutoring opportunity; not attending would not be an option. In the study schools, staff members did not simply make themselves available for those students who chose to take advantage of their offers; they insisted that students take advantage of these opportunities by ensuring that students did not self-select out.

After-School Programs

Many of the seven study schools used grant funds to establish strong after-school programs, and others used the assistance of outside agencies to help staff these programs. At Rockcastle County Middle School, a 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program and a GEAR UP grant provided significant funds for after-school programming. Some of these programs provided academically focused opportunities for project-based learning. But staff members also recognized that these programs helped students find a sense of belonging at the school. Rockcastle County Middle School's GEAR UP coordinator explained that their program sought to work with students "who weren't already involved in other things because [research] showed that students who become involved in some sort of extracurricular activity by the time they graduate from middle school are the ones that are most likely to stay in school." Pocomoke Middle School also received grant funds to run an after-school program that included some academic clubs as well as other kinds of extracurricular activities such as swimming. These kinds of programs provided students many supports, including additional academic support, opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with adults, and safe and positive environments during after-school hours.

Expanding Academic Opportunities

The seven study schools not only provided time outside of the school day to reinforce academic skills, but they also carefully structured the school day so that students who needed additional academic support in certain subject areas had access to additional time in those areas. Sometimes, this meant that some students had to give up opportunities to take an elective class in order to take an additional class in a core subject area.

Tonasket Middle School used a "Discovery Room" staffed by a full-time teacher and instructional aides in order to provide additional support to students who were in danger of failing. The principal explained, "The first purpose was the kids . . . if they started getting behind, they'd come down to the Discovery Room, get caught up, and go back and not fail their classes." Hambrick Middle School scheduled students into additional academic classes when they were struggling. At this school, assistant principals took on teaching responsibilities in the spring semesters so that struggling students had access to additional academic time. The school made it a point to ensure that one assistant principal was an expert in mathematics and the other in language arts so that these individuals were able to provide high-quality teaching to those students who most needed it.

Other schools, like Inman Middle School, used academically oriented elective classes to help students shore up skills. In this school, struggling students were given additional core classes, but other academically oriented classes like debate, library research, and creative writing were also offered so that all students were receiving an additional block of academic instruction during elective

time. JFK Middle School offered Academic Intervention Services (AIS), funded by the state of New York, to students who needed additional help in English Language Arts and mathematics. AIS tutorials were directly written in the students' schedules so that they became an official course.

Helping Students Transition

These schools also recognized the need to help incoming middle school students feel safe in their new environments. A Rockcastle County Middle School teacher noted,

> Kids come to us in sixth grade having had two, maybe three teachers their entire school career. And they're hit with six or seven of us on a team, plus the exploratory teachers, plus the gym teachers, plus the big building, and it's truly a big transition.

Recognizing that this time can be difficult, schools did a number of things to create an atmosphere that helped students adjust quickly and easily. This was done through collaboration with the elementary schools to help students understand what middle school would be like and to give them a social support network.

At several schools, elementary school students were provided the opportunity to visit the middle school during the spring semester before they graduated from elementary school. At Rockcastle County Middle School, they assigned students to their sixth-grade teams before the end of their fifth-grade year so that students knew what to expect and did not have to spend their summers feeling anxious about the coming fall. Additionally, they allowed each student to select one friend who would be assigned to his or her homeroom class so they knew they would see a familiar face when they started middle school. Inman Middle School staff members provided incoming sixth-graders a weeklong transition program in July before they began school. During this time, counselors and teachers worked with students on study skills they would need as sixth-graders and helped them begin to feel comfortable in the middle school setting.

At Inman Middle School, staff recognized that parents also needed information to help allay their fears as their children entered middle school. Parents were invited in to have "coffee with the principal" and to meet with middle school staff members before their children began school in the fall. These meetings gave school staff an opportunity to introduce the school to parents and answer their questions. One Inman Middle School parent expressed appreciation for this effort:

> I have to credit the transition committees that they have here as far as letting the fourth- and fifth-grade parents know what middle school is like and kind of dispelling all the myths and rumors and untruths.

Memorial Junior High School counselors met with sixth-grade students and their teachers at least once a six-week period to discuss issues students faced as they adjusted to attending middle school. Counselors also divided the students alphabetically among themselves so they could work with a smaller group of students and get to know them on an individual basis. Counselors reported that this also helped the students make the transition to middle school more smoothly.

Challenges to Providing Attention to Individual Students

While most schools had a variety of strategies in place to make sure students received individual attention and additional support beyond the classroom, some study schools struggled to implement this goal in practice. Providing individual attention to each student required extensive financial and human resources.

In one case, the school was so focused on raising and maintaining academic achievement that it had not yet implemented programs focused on the developmental needs of students. So while the school provided additional attention to students, it mainly targeted academically struggling students. Once the school met some of its student performance goals, the staff did intend to shift their focus to some of the emotional and social needs of middle-grade students.

No study schools had a formal mentoring program that affected every student and extended beyond "homeroom" situations. Most schools had effective mentoring programs that applied to one grade level or to students who were academically struggling. Because mentoring programs typically occur during the school day, staff wrestled to find a way to balance limited time with what they viewed as a valuable program, mentoring.

Because of the financial and human expenses associated with providing individual attention and extra support to all students, some schools lacked the sustained resources to maintain these services. While some schools relied on grant money and outside sources, other schools had yet to tap into these as means to supporting programs. Additionally, those schools that relied on grant money struggled to sustain this income once grants expired.

Additionally, most of the middle schools had strong elementary-to-middle school transition programs in place but seemed to play a less prominent role in helping students make successful transitions from middle school to high school. Schools tended to focus more on preparing students for the academic rigor of high school rather than on making the transition to high school a positive experience.

As stated, providing additional student services requires support. The schools that had the most success in this area had the most resources to compensate people for their time. They understood that they could not expect people to volunteer for these efforts if they wanted to provide high-quality, sustained programming. Although schools were still working on how to solve these problems, their acknowledgement and recognition of these issues as concerns is a step toward improving.

Chapter III. Understanding How Schools Improved

The schools in this study set high expectations for all as a common focus, created collaborative environments with shared decision making, implemented practices and strategies that supported high expectations for all, and attended to individual students. While it is important to understand what schools that are performing well are doing, it is also important to understand how they arrived at this point. Why were staff willing to change their behaviors? What motivated them and supported them in these efforts? Understanding how critical events and key people led to change as well as how school staff became involved in the change process is useful to other schools wanting to improve student performance. This section of the report is divided into three sections.

- **Context for Change**. This section describes each school's unique starting points that made their situations distinct from others, the critical incidents that served as catalysts for change, and how school staff reacted to these critical incidents and catalysts.
- **Elements of School Improvement**. All of the schools also identified common elements that led to change. These elements included building a shared purpose through leadership; extending this shared purpose into a school culture that permeated the organization and supported student learning; taking stock of the existing setting before implementing change; planning and implementing improvement strategies; and re-evaluating their efforts.
- **Approaches to School Improvement**. Schools used two general approaches to change: whole school and incremental. The whole school approach occurred when school staff used a middle school model to guide their process and made multiple changes at one time. The staff then fine-tuned these changes over time. The incremental approach was used when schools tackled different issues at different times. Schools involved in incremental changes did not begin their improvement process with a pre-existing model for reform.

These schools did not implement all of the same elements of school improvement, nor did they implement them in the same way. Each school approached the improvement process in a unique way that reflected the needs of their individual settings. School improvement was not a linear progression at any school. This section provides the reader with a broad understanding of the general school improvement experiences of the study schools.

Context for Change

Each of these schools did not start their change process in a vacuum. Socioeconomic and historical factors as well as critical incidents such as a change in state policy or school leadership affected the schools. While the schools shared some common starting points and critical incidents, there were also significant differences in their backgrounds.

Recognizing Starting Points

The contextual factors present in each of these seven schools posed both challenges and opportunities. Among these common factors were the presence of concentrated poverty and a history and reputation of poor student performance. However, each school also had strengths that contributed to its improvement process, like staff continuity and access to resources. What made these schools unique was not that they shared poverty and low student performance, but that their staffs made a conscious decision to improve the quality of their schools.

Poverty

All seven schools served—and still serve—economically depressed areas. At least half of each school's students participated in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, and often the proportion of students served by this program was much larger. In three schools, over 70 percent of the students participated in the program.

Overall, staff felt that they could not overlook the presence of poverty in their schools. Some teachers told stories about students who did not have their basic needs met. For example, Inman Middle School served students from five homeless shelters. The staff at the school responded to this situation by working closely with the area social services to ensure that the families with health care coverage, federal food stamps, and subsidized housing. Importantly, parents from many of these schools also viewed school staff as sensitive to this issue. One parent from Rockcastle County Middle School shared, "So I think the staff is very open to understanding the whole dynamics of a poverty school and they're willing to do whatever they need to make sure kids learn."

Poor Reputations

Many of the study schools had both a reputation and a history of poor student performance which seemed to reinforce one another. The history of low performance resulted in a low community opinion of the school, and this reputation of low student performance, in turn, demoralized the school staff and resulted in a shared defeatist attitude. At Tonasket Middle School, for example, teachers had low morale because the system had a tradition of passing students to the next grade level without appropriate knowledge and skills.

The communities also held low expectations for the schools. At Rockcastle County Middle School, the former principal recalled that after finishing his educational administration degree at a local university, one of his professors discouraged him from returning to Rockcastle County because it was a "dead end." Several Memorial Junior High School staff members spoke about the negative perceptions the community held of the school. At Tonasket Middle School, area residents wanted to hide their schools from outside visitors. The Tonasket hospital administrator told the newly arrived superintendent that he never brought doctors to the school when he was trying to recruit them because there was "no way that they would want to put their kids here."

In some cases, teachers had adopted a defeatist attitude. At Hambrick Middle School, staff had felt that under circumstances such as theirs, "even the best teachers could not succeed." In some schools, success in the classroom simply meant that the teacher was able to maintain order. Many staff members accepted their school's failing status.

Strengths That Could be Built Upon

Even though these schools faced many obstacles, the staff at each felt they had certain strengths they could build upon. These factors varied across schools, and no one school had all of these advantages; but the ability of the school's faculty and staff to recognize and capitalize on opportunities in their environments was essential to their improvement efforts. Some of these strengths included stability of personnel and the availability of additional resources. Most schools employed experienced and dedicated teachers. Sixty-six percent of teachers surveyed had seven years or more experience teaching (Teacher Survey). In some cases, schools had very stable and experienced teaching staff. At Inman Middle School, many staff members had worked at the school for their entire careers. At JFK Middle School, the majority of teachers had worked at the school more than half their careers. Although some schools experienced fairly high teacher turnover, they tended to have a stable core group of teachers. For example, Pocomoke Middle School lost about one-third of its teaching staff each year but had a core group of veteran teachers that remained

constant. A seasoned teacher at Pocomoke Middle School regarded this core group as a stabilizing factor:

> I think a lot of the success of our school is attributed to people that have been here for a length of time. I think each team has a couple people like myself that have been here ten plus years that have been able to be a stabilizing factor for that grade level and provide leadership for that constant influx of people that come in here.

Some schools benefited from additional resources available to them. For example, Pocomoke was part of a wealthier county. The higher tax base enabled the school to maintain small classes and provide higher salaries than schools in surrounding counties. Other schools benefited from strong community support. At Inman Middle School, for example, parents and community groups invested human and financial resources in additional educational programs.

It is important to remember that, while these different advantages certainly helped these seven study schools improve, none of them had all advantages in place. While some schools had additional financial resources, others had to reallocate existing funds or seek grant funding in order to support the improvements they needed. While some schools benefited from their stable teaching staff, others had to find ways to support the continual influx of new teachers. And while some schools benefited from their small size, other schools had to identify strategies to make their school feel smaller and more intimate. Each of these schools had individual contexts that included both opportunities and challenges. The staff at these schools looked at their specific settings and found ways to capitalize on opportunities that would lead to improved student performance.

Changing the Environment

In most of these schools, some event or set of events served as a catalyst for change. These critical events included changes in state policy such as the creation of standards and accountability systems; changes at the local level such as new leadership at both the district and school levels; and changes in facilities that created an opportunity for a fresh start. In some schools, several events occurred simultaneously.

Changes at the State Level

Most of the schools studied faced changes in state legislation in recent years and had to respond to them accordingly. Because states made student performance data publicly available, school staff faced scrutiny. Many teachers expressed that new state standards and assessment systems were the most important contextual factors that affected their schools. More than 70 percent of teachers surveyed reported that state standards had most influenced their instruction (Teacher Survey).

Each school, however, was affected differently by changes in state policies. For example, states implemented accountability systems at different times, so schools had different levels of experience in learning how to respond to the systems. While in Texas, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) had been in place and stable since 1994, New York state did not implement a new assessment system until 1998. In addition, some states used multiple assessments. In Maryland, for example, three separate assessments were in place at the middle school level.

Some state reform efforts brought sweeping changes to standards and the accountability systems. Other state reforms dramatically changed how schools were funded. For example, the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) that laid the groundwork for statewide standards with aligned curricula and assessment also dramatically changed how schools were financed. As a result, poorer districts such as Rockcastle County benefited from an increase in financial resources. Some

states initiated programs that encouraged schools, through financial incentives, to develop and meet the new standards. For example, Inman Middle School benefited from the Pay for Performance Program initiated by Georgia as an incentive to teachers to improve student performance.

Changes at the Local Level

In some schools, personnel changes in key leadership positions made dramatic changes possible. In several instances, new superintendents came to the district. In Rockcastle County, a progressive superintendent came on board. The new superintendent had a vision for change and a clear resolve that the district could improve. At Tonasket, the new superintendent envisioned a new district that had strong administrative leadership and new facilities. Both superintendents had definite ideas about what their districts should become. At many schools, such as Inman Middle School, Hambrick Middle School, and Memorial Junior High School, the staff credited the arrival of the new principal as the motivation for change.

In two instances, the addition of new facilities gave the schools opportunities to rebuild for a fresh start. The Tonasket community passed a bond to finance new facilities including a new middle school. In Rockcastle County, a new high school was built and the old high school building was converted to become the new middle school. But critical incidents alone did not lead to positive change. Change occurred because the staff in the study schools chose to respond proactively to these incidents.

Adapting to Change

Most schools described a variety of critical incidents as catalysts for change. At some schools, people identified a single event as the turning point for them, such as the arrival of a new principal. At other schools, however, school staff identified several events as critical in their improvement process. Furthermore, the degree to which schools regarded external factors as their starting points for change varied.

The staff at these schools chose to look at the critical events affecting them as motivators and opportunities to improve rather than as negative events. The schools had different reasons for reacting proactively. Sometimes they reacted proactively because they were supportive of the changes that occurred in the context around them. For example, staff at Rockcastle County Middle School supported the new accountability system because of the additional funding and curriculum alignment it brought. Sometimes, the schools reacted proactively out of a sense of responsibility to their students. Because of poor student scores on the new state-mandated tests, teachers at Pocomoke Middle School were motivated to take responsibility for student learning and provide students with more support. The ex-principal explained:

> There was one year that our fifth-grade writing scores came back at like 11 percent or 13 percent [passing], and it was like oh my gosh, what are we doing. And the curriculum planner and I met with the fifth-grade team frequently after that, and we talked about [how] our kids were not 11 percent kids or they weren't 13 percent kids. They were better than that and how could we structure our instruction to make sure that our kids were demonstrating on the test how capable they really were. We didn't think that was the picture of who our kids were.

Other times, staff reacted proactively because they made a conscious decision to make the best of an inevitable situation. At JFK Middle School, when the school received low student scores on the new state assessment, the staff was alarmed. As one staff member recalled, "We can say we can't do it, and not do it. Or we can say we can do it, and then do it."

School staff faced similar decisions with regard to a change in leadership. Staff could support the new leadership or reluctantly accept the new leadership because they saw no other choice. Generally, the school staff in this study were supportive of incoming leadership. Staff showed openness to change and a willingness to try new approaches. The improvements these schools made would not have been possible if staff were not active participants in the changes being made.

Elements of School Improvement

Geiser and Berman's (2000) research on high-performing learning communities suggested that schools experiencing change go through similar processes. They explained these processes as getting staff buy-in, planning strategies with follow-through for meeting goals, providing ongoing support and professional development, adapting to fit the context, and re-evaluating during implementation. The schools in this study engaged in similar processes. Study schools built shared purposes through strong leadership, established cultures that supported teaching and learning, reflected on their settings, planned and implemented strategies, and re-evaluated their progress. Although these processes are described in a loose temporal order, in reality, they did not necessarily occur in this linear fashion but often overlapped or occurred simultaneously.

Building a Shared Purpose Through Strong Leadership

Much research in the area of school change has argued the need for a shared purpose among school staff if changes are to be successful (Glasser 1990; McDonald 1996; Schletchy 1997; Senge 2000). People committed to a coherent direction have the potential to crystallize efforts and eliminate diversions. Additionally, Jeannie Oakes and her colleagues (1993) found that changes in the leadership process were the first steps in creating a shared purpose for a school.

Leading with a Purpose

The majority of the study schools brought in a leader who communicated a clear purpose to the school staff from the beginning, was ready to share leadership, and set clear expectations for staff and students.

Communicating a clear purpose. In most schools, a new leader came in who was responsible for improving student performance and forming a clear focus for the school. These leaders were committed to creating schools that valued equity and high expectations. Over 90 percent of the teachers surveyed agreed that their principal set high standards for teaching and student learning (Teacher Survey). In some instances, this meant staff members needed to change defeatist attitudes they held about student learning. These leaders made it very clear that such attitudes would no longer be tolerated. For example, at Memorial Junior High School, the ex-principal recalled that one of her first messages was about high expectations and refusing to accept excuses for poor student performance:

> One of the first [changes] was high expectations. Don't come and tell me that this is a poor Mexican child and he comes from the barrio and everything. No, no, no. I don't want you to come and tell me that we have absolutely no jurisdiction over [a child] while he's at home. While he crosses that street and he gets in here—what are we doing about that child?

Staff from other schools shared similar accounts of leaders coming in with new ideas about what the purpose of the school should be and how this raised the level of expectations for everyone.

An assistant principal expressed how the staff at Hambrick Middle School felt their principal also brought a strong message to the school:

> My expectations are so much different, so much different than those first two years. I thought I had high expectations until [the principal] came in. And you'll see that in other teachers, everywhere you go [here]. And that's what [the principal] really brought in was raising our expectations of the kids.

According to the district's professional development director, JFK Middle School's principal brought in a clear focus with determination to have his staff accept it:

> He just has a way of getting those expectations across to people and making them get that—or helping them to get there. He can be very gentle about well, you need to go such-and-such. But he just won't take no for an answer.

Having a commitment to high expectations for all combined with the belief that all would accept this purpose led to powerful changes in staff attitudes at the study schools. However, people would not have been willing to make changes if they were not supported during this process.

Sharing leadership. While the leaders at the study schools did not waver in commitment to high expectations for all, they also were not autocratic in their leadership styles. They approached their roles intent on facilitating other people's work. For example, at Rockcastle County Middle School, the principal who initiated most of the school's changes viewed his role as one of sharing authority because, "When you share authority, you share responsibility." By sharing his authority, others were allowed ownership of the new direction for the school. Other principals shared similar leadership approaches. The Tonasket Middle School principal worked closely with both district and school staff to make decisions. The staff saw that he valued their input. Teachers at Pocomoke Middle School also felt their principal wanted them to contribute to making decisions: "So I think that makes it more exciting to be here because you feel like you can . . . actually maybe do something about [problems that arise]." While these leaders sought input from others, at the same time, they were unwilling to negotiate about the schools' commitment to high expectations for all.

This approach to leadership moved away from the traditional notion of a single person with authority over others to a view of a leader as someone responsible for supporting the staff and students (Barth 1990; Fullan and Miles 1992; Glickman 1991; Johnson 1996; Reyes, Scribner, and Scribner 1999). Teachers at JFK Middle School viewed their principal as willing to provide them with whatever supports they needed to help students do well. Teachers reported that he constantly asked, "What can we do to help you out? What do you need?" At Memorial Junior High School, staff talked about an environment where they felt supported through having their needs met. One teacher shared that she had come from another school where she did not have her own classroom or any materials she needed and how this completely changed at Memorial Junior High School. The principal at Memorial who initiated many of the school's changes emphasized helping her staff attain success by providing them the supports they needed.

Leading by example. These principals also embodied the values they were trying to instill in the whole school. They demonstrated that they were not asking their staff members to attempt changes they themselves were not also willing to make. The principals in most of the schools exhibited a strong work ethic, arriving early and leaving late. At Inman Middle School, the principal was viewed by his staff as someone who "was here forever." He kept long hours and expected to his staff to be willing to work hard as well. The principal stated, "You [work hard] and if that's not your work ethic, then you just don't fit in. And that's sort of the way it was, it was an overall work ethic."

These leaders held high standards for themselves and challenged themselves to take their schools to the next level. A teacher at JFK Middle School summarized how the principal led by example with the following illustration:

> He is a person who gets things done. I mean, he is on top of everything. And the thing that I always loved is his dedication. He expects a lot from us. He certainly does. But he doesn't expect more from us than he expects from himself. . . .. He'll be here till all hours at night. He's here on the weekend. I mean, he is extremely dedicated.

Building Consensus

While leaders had a clear understanding of their intended direction for the school, their efforts would not have been successful if they were not able to convince enough staff to share this purpose. Building consensus for the new purpose was essential to moving the schools forward. Leaders in the study schools used similar strategies to create momentum for the changes they wanted to make. These leaders took time to learn about their specific school contexts before they made changes. They identified advocates who were ready for improvement. Leaders eliminated distractions from teaching so that faculty could focus their energy in other areas. These leaders also took responsibility for maintaining vigilance and commitment to the purpose so that a loss of focus would not stymie the staff's efforts.

Surveying the setting. Strong leaders came into the study schools with the charge to improve the schools. These leaders did not act rashly, but carefully surveyed the setting before initiating specific changes. Inman Middle School's principal observed the existing situation to make sure his ideas matched the school's capacity and to learn where they would need to grow. This process was mirrored in other schools as well. The Pocomoke Middle School principal shared her view "that every principal comes in and they assess where they think the school is at that given time, and their agenda is to move it forward." A Tonasket Middle School teacher talked about how "as a newcomer on the campus, [the principal] approached his new task methodically, by listening and observing to determine how his personality would fit with the school staff." Other principals took the summer prior to starting their new position to learn more about the staff and students' areas of need.

Once a new direction was communicated by the leader, staff were asked to choose how they fit with the school's future. In each setting, staff reacted to what they were being asked to do in a variety of ways. Some staff accepted the new direction because they felt they had no alternative. At Inman Middle School, a staff member stated that people could not resist change because "they would be resisting the whole school. They would be an island." If they wanted to stay at the school they had to accept change even if they did not do so enthusiastically. While these groups of staff were not excited about the new direction, they also were not able to derail new efforts because so many other staff supported it. Some staff realized their goals did not match the new purpose of the school and felt it would make more sense to leave. The staff at Memorial Junior High School recalled how "out of 125 teachers, slowly but surely maybe 25 left. . . . But those 25 were very detrimental." A majority of the study schools went through similar re-staffing patterns.

In most schools, however, a group of staff members existed who had long been frustrated and were ready for change. These people enthusiastically supported the school's new direction. For example, at Hambrick Middle School many teachers discussed how difficult their work situations had been in the past. Many were tired of the status quo and were prepared for something different. They welcomed the change. In addition, as positions became open, schools selected individuals whose values were aligned with the school's.

Identifying advocates. In all seven schools, there were staff who accepted change because they felt they had little choice; staff who chose to leave; and staff who welcomed change. While it was important to build consensus for the school's new direction, not all staff had to completely agree. This understanding enabled the principals to redirect their energies from trying to persuade the whole staff to adopt their goals to other areas where they could have more of an impact.

Those ready for a change often became advocates for positive change. They made up a critical mass that was essential to the improvement process. The principal at Inman Middle School attributed the success of their changes to the fact that they "had just enough critical mass, which I will define as about 35 percent . . . that allowed us to levy [change]." People came together to form this group in different ways. In some schools, principals identified initiators who already existed—those on staff who were hungry for a change. These people took on key positions. At Tonasket Middle School, enthusiastic teachers assumed positions as teacher leaders, where they could influence their peers through ongoing interactions as curriculum supports. These teachers played an important role in helping other staff to come on board. Staff at Rockcastle County Middle School who were excited about anticipated changes were placed onto committees to help map out the new direction of the school. These people were sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly charged with convincing their colleagues to buy into the common purpose.

Eliminating teaching distractions. In some schools staff became advocates for change after principals eliminated distractions from teaching. Some of these schools had a history of poor student management systems. This situation took teachers' time and energy away from focusing on classroom instruction. In two schools, this issue was addressed through multiple organizational changes. At Hambrick Middle School, the principal instituted a number of organizational changes that helped with student discipline. She eliminated bells to begin and dismiss classes, reduced transition time between classes, and eliminated the use of lockers. These actions reduced unstructured time for students. All of these small changes had an immediate, positive impact on school climate, and discouraged inappropriate student behavior that had been an issue in the past.

In some schools, the most immediate issues were addressed quickly. For example, the principal at Memorial Junior High School came into a situation where vandalism was common before the school day began. She changed the school's policy and permitted students to come inside the building in the mornings. The vandalism stopped and teachers felt not only safer but also more focused. The message from these principals was that their job was to help teachers do their jobs.

Maintaining vigilance. The majority of principals in these schools also took primary responsibility for maintaining vigilance with respect to the school's purpose. As Lipsitz and her colleagues (1997) found, loss of intensity and vigilance on maintaining focus often stymies schools' change processes. Principals in the study schools helped maintain focus on their schools' goals by frequently and deliberatively communicating their expectations with their staff. Sometimes these communications occurred formally through events such as faculty meetings. At JFK Middle School, the principal linked meeting agenda items to school goals. He also provided staff members with binders that detailed school goals and procedures to eliminate any guesswork. Other principals focused their efforts on making state-mandated campus improvement plans living and useful documents. For example, at Memorial Junior High School, the improvement plans not only identified goals but also linked strategies and benchmarks to the goals so everyone would know how to achieve a specific goal and how to measure progress. This document was a part of daily practice for teachers.

The principals in these schools would not have been as successful in spreading a shared purpose if they had not had the time to make these changes. Schools and their staffs needed time to evolve. They needed to accept change, create a shared purpose, and plan for progress. In all of the schools, principals had the luxury of having at least four years to shape the schools. During this

time, the schools did not experience the instability at the administrative level that often impedes the improvement process (Lipsitz et al. 1997). An assistant principal from Hambrick Middle School summed up the importance of this opportunity:

> It took a couple of years to get going because it's just like anything. I always compare it to a football program. You hire a football coach, you don't expect him the first year to take [you to] a national championship or even to a bowl [game].

In the majority of study schools, in order to build consensus, principals implemented multiple strategies simultaneously to find a critical mass that could influence less willing staff to buy into the school's new direction. Some principals combined organizational changes with placing staff members into more influential positions, while other schools focused more attention on personnel issues. Regardless of the order or timeline, what was essential was that the principals demonstrated a strong direction for where the school should go and created a group willing to support this direction.

Establishing a Shared Culture That Supports Teaching and Learning

Once a common purpose was established and shared by the staff, this focus began to permeate the daily routines of staff and become part of the school culture. When particular values become embedded in an organization's culture, they become a natural part of the everyday talk and behavior of members of that organization. Additionally, individuals within the organization begin to take responsibility for integrating newcomers and outsiders into the existing culture (Schein 1992).

Embedded in the cultures of these seven schools were the values of equity, high achievement, and hard work. The culture of these schools stands in sharp contrast to the "toxic cultures" described by Deal and Peterson (1999) that reinforced negativity and inhibited productive change. A Tonasket Middle School teacher said, "There is a culture here that expects change to occur. And they expect to be part of that change." Staff members were also proud of the fact that outsiders had come to understand that there was something unique and valuable about their schools. Often, this new positive reputation contrasted with the negative reputations many of these schools had prior to change. The former principal from Rockcastle County Middle School remembered,

> I attended some meetings and people would ask you where you were from. I'm from Rockcastle County . . . and you got that kind of condescending look and they'd move on and talk to someone else. Now we're at the point, though, where people come to us.

Initially, leaders in these schools helped bring about this culture by implementing changes that showed they valued and respected staff and through establishing traditions that reflected these values. This section provides evidence of positive cultures found in the study schools, and of how leaders shaped culture and took responsibility for spreading culture.

Sharing Common Stories

Schein (1992) notes that organizations develop common stories, especially in times of transformation and change. Staff members from these schools often told the same story when describing some aspect of their school's history at critical times. Embedded in the common stories used by staff members were shared understandings of the school's history, the school's change, and a new sense of purpose.

When describing Tonasket Middle School before school improvement, students, teachers, and parents shared a common story exemplifying the need for change. They recalled snow melting through the roof of the old building into trashcans in teachers' rooms. One staff member said,

> The building was beyond words. You know, we had garbage cans at that time, I'm sure people have told you about this. . . . Kids would have to move their desks over . . . because we had to put a garbage can there to catch the leaks. And so, at that time the whole climate of the school was completely different. Discipline—was a real problem . . . the kids were not proud of our school.

Over and over, members of this school community used the leaky roofs of the old school to exemplify the general lack of pride that had existed, and they marked the school's turnaround as beginning when the community finally expressed their commitment to the school by passing a bond issue enabling them to build a new facility.

Hambrick Middle School teachers marked their turnaround with the arrival of a new administrator who was committed to supporting teachers. In describing this, several staff members told the story of the principal getting a dry-erase board for a math teacher who was allergic to chalk. For this staff, this story represented a change in the way administration viewed teachers, and a new understanding between teachers and administrators. One assistant principal described this understanding:

> We expect our teachers to be doing everything they can do for their students. We do the same thing to be sure that they have the things that they need. . . . If they want it, they ask for it, and we get it for them . . . down to simple things like scissors; they want scissors, [they] get that. They want a dry-erase board, [they] get that. Anything possible that you can get for them, we'll get it.

These stories were told not by one or two staff members, but repeatedly as staff members related their common understanding of their school's history and future. Telling the stories helped staff members stay mindful of the positive changes that had occurred.

Sharing Common Language

Members of these schools used common language to portray their shared understanding of who they were and what differentiated them from other schools. In several of these schools, staff members talked about being treated professionally. For instance, Rockcastle County Middle School teachers explicitly stated: "We're professional. We know what we need help in and we know what will help us." Teachers valued being treated as professionals. A teacher at JFK Middle School stated, "I love being treated professionally. . . . It just gives you . . . a very nice feeling that you're treated as a professional." Another phrase that was commonly used among staff members from almost every school was "family-like." This phrase sent a message about a closeness among those working at the school. Staff used these words often, and the words served as evidence that members of this culture saw themselves as having specific common characteristics that differentiated them from others.

Shaping Culture Through Leadership

Schein (1992) placed particular emphasis on the role of the leader in shaping culture: "One could argue that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to understand and work with culture" (p.5). Sashkin (1988) built on Schein's work by specifically emphasizing the role of the principal in culture

building. Principals in the study schools shaped culture in many ways. Specifically, leaders from these seven schools sent messages to the staff about the values they promoted through their actions and through establishing traditions that embodied these values.

In several of these schools, principals paid careful attention to facilities as a way of instilling a sense of school pride in community members. At Hambrick Middle School, one of the first things the principal did upon coming to the school was to clean up the building—replacing the chairs in the auditorium, fixing broken light fixtures, and having the lockers painted. A staff member explained,

> Those small things added up to huge differences so that kids started to see that it was important to [the principal] and it was important to us where they studied. . . . It was clean and well kept [and that] made them proud of where they came to school.

Principals from many schools also found additional money for stipends for teachers who stayed after hours tutoring students who needed additional help or for teachers attending professional development. Typically, this was not a large amount of money but it did send an important message to teachers about being valued and about the importance of taking time to meet students' academic needs. Teachers from these seven schools talked about the fact that administrators took the time to make them feel valued in many ways.

Traditions that promoted the school's values were also established, and these reinforced a common culture in important ways. At Tonasket Middle School teachers and administrators went out into the hallways each day to greet students as they entered the building, establishing through this daily routine that adults in this school cared for individual students. At Memorial Junior High School, the principal had the names of students who scored well on the state-administered writing test painted on the cafeteria walls each year, prominently displaying the school's focus on achievement. At Inman Middle School the principal began a "Changing of the Chairs" ceremony at the end of each school year that symbolized the eighth-grade class passing on leadership responsibilities to the seventh-graders. The principal explained, "I'm real big on tradition. I think tradition is important. It's important to family. It gives people something to hang their hat on."

Shaping Culture Through Staff Participation

Eventually, staff members took responsibility for making sure the culture survived by sending strong messages to those who did not seem to belong. In this way, they protected the positive culture they had worked hard to establish. One way they did this was by communicating to new staff what was expected of them. A staff member from Inman Middle School noted,

> We've had problems with [new] people [coming] from other schools who may have talked . . . with kids a certain way. Talked to parents a certain way. And who had to just be pulled to the side and say, "Look, we don't talk to children that way here." And had—almost had to just go through a whole re-education process where, you know, you don't say this is stupid. No, you don't tell them to shut up. No you don't . . . tell parents . . . well that's just the way it is. No, that's not the way it is.

However, these messages were not reserved only for new staff. A teacher from Tonasket Middle School recalled a story in which staff members sent a strong message to a particular teacher:

> Our kids had done well on the math [examination] and [the principal] was congratulating [us] and a teacher stood up and said, "Uh, wait a minute. What's the

> big [deal] you know, why are we even trying? I mean, tests don't mean [anything]—it's not going to change my salary scale." And at that point several people in the staff room said, "They do count. It is important. And we do have to try to get these kids academically ready." And . . . everyone kind of turned on this person, you know, and said . . . [the tests] are important.

Because they were proud of what they had accomplished, and because in many cases they remembered working in circumstances that were much worse, staff members eventually shared in the responsibility of maintaining a positive culture. The fact that they had numerous opportunities to interact with one another made this possible.

Unlike teachers working in many other schools across the country, teachers in these seven schools also had many opportunities to talk with one another. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) pointed out that teachers have a long history of working in isolation and that this isolation inhibits risk-taking and change. Many of the teachers from these seven schools contrasted their new work situations with prior ones in which they did not have time to work and talk with their colleagues. They described new work situations in which they had daily interactions with other staff members. Teachers at Tonasket Middle School ate lunch together each day. For them, leaving their classrooms during lunch and sharing this time with their co-workers represented their beginning to coalesce as a staff. A Tonasket Middle School teacher explained that this was not always the case:

> Everyone was very isolated. They went to their own rooms. I said yesterday, we holed up in our rooms, just to protect ourselves, cover our rear-ends. And we started to open up. One of the best things that happened when we moved out here [to the new building] was we had this lunch room that we were all encouraged to be in for lunch. And it gave us a time to get to know each other and break down those barriers and start talking.

More often, this exchange of ideas occurred during daily team meetings. The former principal from Pocomoke Middle School explained,

> Having team meetings in middle school is really important for buy-in because you get a set of people who work with the same kids meeting together every day to talk about curriculum issues, to talk about management issues, to plan together, to commiserate together, and then to celebrate together.

The staff in these schools had, over time, developed a shared understanding of who they were, where they had come from, and what their purpose was. This understanding was nurtured by the leadership and could not have come about if teachers had not had ample time to talk with one another. The cultures of these schools allowed staff to establish a foundation from which they could feel safe to examine where their schools were and where they wanted to go. Within these shared cultures existed a supportive environment in which no one felt they were struggling alone.

Reflecting on Current Situations

Once staff shared a common purpose and developed a culture around this purpose, they moved on to critically examining themselves. These schools often took the time to take stock of their current situation and assess where they were compared to their objectives. They frequently examined performance data, and this became a way of determining what had to be done in order to close the gap between where they were and where they hoped to be. They also used other kinds of

information, such as staff, student, and parent surveys, enrollment data, and student referral data, to determine which parts of the system were not working well. Essential to this element of change was the school staff's investment in deciding what would work best given their unique environments. No school applied reform strategies without adapting them to fit their specific circumstances.

Most often, schools looked at student performance data to identify weaknesses in instruction and curriculum. Different people initiated this effort in different schools. Sometimes it was a whole staff effort, other times a principal or person in charge of curriculum took the initiative. In most cases, staff disaggregated student performance data in multiple ways, including by grade level, ethnicity, learning objective, and responses to particular items. This format allowed staff to pinpoint weaknesses across classes, as well as to identify individual students who needed additional support. For example, at Pocomoke Middle School, data were used to help staff members pinpoint areas for overall improvement. According to a teacher, "We look overall at the needs based on our . . . student achievement scores. . . . We try to evaluate what it is that we need to do to best help the teachers help the students achieve."

Tonasket Middle School used data in a similar way. They also focused on restructuring their curriculum and making sure that all teachers were aware of how to use data to identify what areas needed more attention. The principal described their process:

> First look at the data for trends to see what we're doing as teachers. And then you look at individual kids and where they fit in. . . . And they can refer to that [data] and see where kids have strengths and weaknesses in their classrooms.

Hambrick Middle School used enrollment data to make sure students were served in an equitable manner. Through reviewing the data, the principal noticed that white students were disproportionately enrolled in higher-level classes. The principal led an initiative to increase the number of minority students taking higher-level courses, such as Algebra I.

Inman Middle School also focused school improvement efforts through the use of data. They not only used data from standardized tests, but also used survey data reflecting how well students and parents felt the school was meeting their needs. A counselor explained, "We survey the parents, the students, and the teachers. And it asks all kinds of questions about being comfortable here and if there's any way to help you and things like that."

Planning and Implementing Strategies

Once areas of need were identified, staff then began working to find strategies to help them address these areas. Schools turned to a variety of sources to learn new strategies. Some schools looked into research. Some visited districts and schools that had experienced similar challenges and had successfully overcome them. Some schools turned to their districts for support. Some brought in outside assistance. In all cases, schools made a substantial investment in increasing the capacity of their teachers.

For example, after the staff at JFK Middle School identified that they spent disproportionate teaching time on marginal topics and insufficient time on key state standards, the district facilitated a summer workshop to align the curriculum with the new standards. Teachers received stipends funded by the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program[12] to attend the

[12] The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program "aims to raise student achievement by helping low-income and low-achieving public schools across the country to implement successful, comprehensive school reforms

voluntary workshop. These stipends helped bring the workshop participation rate close to 90 percent.

A JFK Middle School teacher reported that the curriculum workshop allowed teachers to get together and "hash out problems . . . . The effect of getting the teachers together is tremendous." During these summer workshops, teachers prepared sample units that were aligned to the standards. Using a unit writing guide, the teachers addressed questions such as: What are the objectives? What standards are addressed? What materials will be used? What previous knowledge or skills do the students bring? What assessment is used to ensure mastery of knowledge? Thus, the new standards "resulted in curriculum alignment vertically and horizontally [with] specifically defined skills expectations per grade level" (Teacher Survey).

Rockcastle County Middle School identified the need to eliminate duplication of services because they had so many service providers funded by different grants. This school turned to an outside agency to guide them in this process. The technical assistance providers helped the school examine data and make recommendations. The district curriculum specialist recalled, "Right at the top of their recommendations was that all these people needed to be communicating so that they were not duplicating." This process led to increased communication between different service providers, including the district and school, which eliminated the redundancy and filled in gaps that previously existed.

Hambrick Middle School's use of data to examine higher-level course enrollment led to extensive teacher training centered on learning how to identify and serve gifted students. The principal recalled how they "changed how they looked at the child to see there's potential here."

Pocomoke Middle School's examination of data sometimes triggered curriculum alignment efforts, sometimes whole school programs such as a renewed focus on reading and language arts, and sometimes staff development initiatives such as their staff development focus on serving students from diverse backgrounds. In all cases, the reforms were grounded in information about school and student needs. Changes were not implemented haphazardly or based on the interests of a small group of individuals, but on information describing what schools needed in order to improve student performance.

Re-Evaluating and Moving Forward

Another important part of the change process for the study schools was reflecting on where they were and raising their expectations for where they could be. Staff participated in honest deliberations about how well their strategies addressed their goals. If they had successfully met their goals, staff looked for strategies to increase expectations for students. This desire to move forward and not be satisfied with simply meeting the goals they set was key to the schools' improvement processes. This section provides examples of how schools re-evaluated their work and set higher goals with strategies to achieve them.

Memorial Junior High School made re-evaluating their goals a part of their campus improvement plan by including strategies attached to benchmarks in the plan. Through this process, the staff could look at the benchmarks and determine if they had met their goal. For example, the school identified the benchmark of having 35 percent of students enrolled in pre-AP classes by 2003–04. In order to achieve this goal, the campus improvement plan detailed a variety of content

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that are based on reliable research and effective practices." For more information, see the U.S Department of Education website at www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform (accessed 16 April 2002).

area professional development sessions that the staff would attend for the next three years. Staff were assigned to hold the campus responsible for meeting these goals.

Pocomoke Middle School staff viewed re-evaluating their goals as an ongoing process that would occur all year. A teacher explained how, as part of their campus improvement plan, staff constantly reviewed data and discussed what changes needed to be made:

> Every time some type of assessment is given in which we get data back or whether it's a county assessment or a school assessment or a state assessment, then whichever teams it impacts, whether it's a seventh-grade assessment, they will get together and review that data to see if there's anything that they need to change in what they're doing, any specific needs within the school.

Through this process, the staff were constantly aware of how close they were to meeting goals and could have an ongoing dialogue about setting new goals.

Tonasket Middle School reassessed current weaknesses and strengths of the school in the context of writing a grant. In order to determine where the school was, Tonasket Middle School administered a climate survey. They asked students and teachers what they liked about their school, what they disliked, and what they would change. Using the survey results, the school created a plan for moving forward.

Other campuses focused on including more students in testing programs and higher-level content courses. These schools measured their current status, set reasonable standards for where they could be in a year, and then continued this progression to develop a multiyear plan with yearly markers.

Through these plans, schools were able to perpetuate their improvement. Having clear strategies and re-evaluation as a part of these strategies helped schools focus on what was the most important. This process ensured a plan and accountability for achieving the plan.

The schools in this study implemented common elements in their school improvement efforts, such building a shared purpose through strong leadership, taking ownership of shaping culture around the purpose, reflecting on the needs of the school, and planning, implementing, and reevaluating strategies to meet these needs. While the schools did not implement these elements at the same time or in the exact same way, that they occurred across sites was significant and indicates that schools wanting to engage in similar efforts can learn from their experiences.

Approaches to School Improvement

While these schools did share similar elements of improvement, no one perfect solution for approaching improvement emerged. There was no linear pattern. Change occurred on different timetables and in different ways in each school. However, most of the schools applied one of two general approaches to change: a whole school approach or an incremental approach. In the first case, change occurred across the whole system simultaneously and at in the same timeframe. The whole school approach was typically well planned by a significant proportion of the school community. With the second approach, more often than not, change occurred incrementally, with reform occurring in a few areas at a time, giving staff members the opportunity to build on their success. Incremental changes involved well-planned strategies to fine-tune the system.

Implementing Whole School Reform

Rockcastle County Middle School and Tonasket Middle School had the opportunity to implement whole school reforms. This occurred because of dramatic changes in their contexts. In

each case, schools were moving into new facilities and were bringing in new leadership. Also, staff had time to plan models for how to structure the schools. School leadership teams spent a great deal of time engaged in researching middle school models and talking with the school community about the new direction for the school before changes were implemented.

The principal at Rockcastle County Middle School worked with the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to provide staff and community members with research on the middle school concept based on *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century Model for Middle Grades Reform* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). A teacher explained how "[the principal] did the research and we had to decide whether we were going to be a traditional [junior high school] or go the group way." Staff and community decided the middle school model made sense.

This choice represented a monumental change for the district. It was completely new territory for them. It meant that personnel from three different K–8 schools would be brought together to staff the new school using an unfamiliar model. It also meant they would be making many changes in how they structured the school, delivered instruction, and thought about education for the middle grades. For example, they implemented teaming, common planning, and block scheduling at the same time. Many of these changes were implemented during the first year and fine-tuned as the school evolved. To make this process successful, the school staff spent time studying the research and discussing how to implement the changes to fit their context.

At Tonasket Middle School, in the same year, a bond passed to build a new school and the principal position became vacant. School staff realized that they had an opportunity for a new start. The superintendent advocated to implement the middle school model: "Philosophically, I really thought we needed to have a change at the K–8 building. The middle school philosophy is quite different from what a K–8 building would provide." He also advocated for hiring a principal with experience implementing a middle school model.

The staff also believed it was important to hire an administrator experienced in the middle school concept. Once a principal was hired, he brought the staff together for a retreat to plan how to implement the middle school model. Teachers identified this retreat as a critical incident in the school's change process. The entire staff gathered for an intense time of reflection, planning, and brainstorming that laid the groundwork for shared decision making and a new identity for the middle school.

While this school did not follow a specific middle school model, they did begin with an idea of creating a school that reflected the middle school concept. Organizational changes such as teaming and common planning followed later in the school's improvement process but grew from this initial acceptance of the middle school identity.

Both of these schools capitalized on opportunities to do things differently. Since significant time to plan was available to these schools, and there was no strong traditions for doing things a certain way, staff members were able to implement major reforms simultaneously and contribute to the new direction for the schools.

Implementing Incremental Change

Other schools that did not have an opportunity for a fresh start implemented changes more incrementally. Incremental changes included a variety of approaches. These approaches ranged from one grade level in a school trying a new strategy and then implementing it schoolwide to changes occurring in one area of the system, such as teaming, before moving on to changes in another area, such as curriculum alignment. In these cases, the changes were not necessarily under the umbrella of creating a school based on the middle school model so much as improving student performance,

which often did include the implementation of middle school concepts. Almost all schools implemented the strategies of common planning, teaming, and blocking.

JFK Middle School staff chose the issue of promoting appropriate student behavior as one of the first areas to improve. Once they developed a structured plan and were able to follow it, the staff turned to the issue of curriculum alignment. Teachers spent time in the summer matching what they taught within and across grade levels with state standards. The school also began addressing the issue of bringing in more community support. These efforts resulted in a partnership with local businesses to provide students an opportunity to work in real-world environments.

At Memorial Junior High School, the principal became aware of the teaming model through reading research and having conversations with teachers who had worked in middle schools in other districts. Convinced that the model would be effective, the principal began sharing information with the teachers and putting processes in place to change the school's organizational structure. She also had the staff read books about how to implement teaming and then invited nationally recognized authors to come speak at the school. Teaming began with one group of seventh-grade teachers who piloted the concept for a year. Based on their success with teaming and the students' improved behavior and performance, the rest of the school implemented the strategy.

In addition to simply implementing a structural change, district personnel spent time with teachers thinking about how to structure this time effectively. The summer before teaming was introduced, teachers and administrators attended staff development on how to make it successful.

Once the school implemented teaming, they then moved into the area of curriculum alignment. They had access to curriculum specialists on the campus, and consultants were able to bring teachers together from middle schools across the county to discuss the best approaches to curriculum alignment. The school wrestled with the complexity of how to align curricula at the middle school level since it was important to examine standards for both elementary school and high school in order to understand what students were exposed to before coming to middle school and what would be expected of them when they left.

At Inman Middle School, the staff examined the team concept. Previously each teacher had taught in two subject areas. After assessing each teacher's strengths, administrators changed teachers' responsibilities to work in one subject area. This way each teacher could concentrate on building content knowledge in one area rather than two. Teachers moved into grade-level teams during this transition.

After the school addressed teaming and scheduling, they looked into curriculum alignment and other issues. One area that the staff emphasized was creating more parent and community involvement with the school. The staff began an aggressive marketing campaign to sell the school to local residents who had historically chosen private education for their children. The principal felt the community did not know what Inman Middle School offered academically and developmentally for their children. They began educating these possible clients. The school hosted coffees with the principal. Counselors also attended these meetings, which occurred twice a month—once for parents of prospective students to tell them about what the school offered and once for parents of current students to make sure the school was meeting their needs. These efforts resulted in attracting more neighborhood children to the school and creating a very active PTA.

The principal also worked with the larger Atlanta community to attract volunteers to the school. He was able to draw in abundant human resources, including partnerships with large organizations such as universities and organized volunteer programs. By increasing its human capital, the school was able to offer more in-depth academic and developmental supports to students.

In these schools that progressed incrementally, success in one round of reform triggered a second round. For Memorial Junior High School, successful teaming meant that teachers began

working together and blocking soon followed. At Pocomoke Middle School, the implementation of common planning time for teams of teachers made changes in curriculum and instruction possible. At Inman Middle School, bringing in members of the community enabled the school to broaden the services offered to the students. In this way, waves of successful reform followed one another, resulting in continual improvement.

The improvement process was not taken lightly by school staff. Regardless if schools implemented a whole school approach or more of incremental approach, what was common to all schools was the deliberation and thoughtfulness they brought to this endeavor. In no setting were structural or organizational changes blindly made without consideration of the larger school context. As demonstrated by these schools, improvement efforts were most effective when they were made by staff who understood the direction of the improvement process and were committed to making this vision a reality.

Chapter IV. Recommendations

The findings discussed above imply numerous policy and practice actions that states, districts, and schools can take to improve student performance. These recommendations follow from the findings and are framed around how the seven study schools invested in increasing the capacity of the school, the staff, and the students in order to improve student performance. Each general recommendation is supported by specific action steps leaders can take to affect school improvement. These recommendations are not meant to serve as a laundry list of how to improve student performance. Rather, these are starting points to be pursued thoughtfully and critically by whole staffs committed to and hungry for student improvement.

Building the Capacity of the School

One implication from the findings was that the staff at the seven study schools viewed increasing the capacity of the entire school as an important step in their school improvement efforts. They realized that knowledge, ideas, and inspiration could not be held in the hands of only a few if their efforts were to succeed. This section outlines recommendations and examples of action steps that these schools used.

Recommendation:	**Maintain high expectations for all students.**
Action Step:	Define expectations that are in line with state standards and frequently communicate these expectations to students, families, and staff.
Action Step:	Align curriculum vertically and horizontally with state standards so that students are exposed to the material they are expected to master.
Action Step:	Reward students and teachers for commitment to high expectations by recognizing their efforts and embedding this recognition in the daily practices of the schools.

Recommendation:	**Ensure all students are provided a quality education.**
Action Step:	Incorporate all students, including those receiving special education and English as a Second Language services, in mainstream classrooms and provide them with the same content received by other students.
Action Step:	Increase the enrollment of traditionally underserved students in advanced-level classes, such as Algebra I in the eighth grade and gifted and talented programs.
Action Step:	Implement a "no-failure policy" that ensures struggling students are identified early and receive supports, such as additional tutoring, to help them succeed.

Recommendation:	**Train and recruit leaders to guide school improvement efforts.**
Action Step:	Identify leaders with a definite vision for school improvement who

	are not paralyzed by obstacles facing high-poverty schools and who are willing to make changes that respect a school's unique context.
Action Step:	Advocate for leaders who value building consensus and sharing decision making authority.
Action Step:	Provide leaders with time to introduce staff to change, create a shared purpose, and plan for progress.

Recommendation:	**Provide data that schools and staff can use to make curricular and instructional decisions.**
Action Step:	Ensure staff have training in how to make data meaningful and useful to school improvement efforts.
Action Step:	Use data to identify areas of weakness in school performance by disaggregating data by grade level, subject area, learning strand, gender, ethnicity, and income levels.
Action Step:	Use student-level performance data to target struggling students for additional academic support.

Recommendation:	**Expand current ideas of what resources are and how to use resources to affect school improvement.**
Action Step:	Expose staff to views of resources that go beyond money to include time, space, and relationships.
Action Step:	Provide school staff with training on how to access more human and non-human resources, such as through building partnerships with outside organizations and applying for grants.
Action Step:	Redistribute space, time, and money on campuses to better support schoolwide learning goals through compensating teachers for tutoring and professional development, creating additional academic programs, and providing teachers with needed materials.

Recommendation:	**Create more intimate school settings that focus on improving student learning.**
Action Step:	Train staff on how to implement elements of the middle school concept, such as teaming and block scheduling, that increase the amount of time and intensity students have with a smaller group of teachers.
Action Step:	Provide students with opportunities to build relationships with adults through small groupings and mentoring programs.
Action Step:	Eliminate distractions to teaching through organizational changes, such as eliminating bells and grouping grade-level teams in the same area of the buildings.

Building the Capacity of Teachers

The second implication from the findings was that study schools made large investments in increasing the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality curriculum and instruction. Improving student performance would have been impossible if teachers were not effectively supported. This section discusses the recommendations the study results imply and the action steps to achieve those recommendations.

Recommendation:	**Provide school staff with meaningful professional development closely aligned with individual and schoolwide needs.**
Action Step:	Offer professional development opportunities that address specifically defined student learning goals and that are ongoing and in-depth, such as university courses and workshops with intensive follow-up sessions.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with alternative forms of professional development, such as peer coaching and curriculum lead teachers, which allow them to create shared professional knowledge with their school colleagues.

Recommendation:	**Treat staff as professionals whose input and expertise are valued.**
Action Step:	Provide teachers with more authority to make decisions about areas that most affect their work, such as professional growth, curricular and instructional choices, and school organization.
Action Step:	Compensate teachers for the time they spend in additional activities, such as curriculum alignment, professional development, and student tutoring, through stipends or by providing substitutes teachers so that these activities could take place during regular working hours.
Action Step:	Ask teachers what resources, materials, and supplies they need to be effective in their classrooms and then provide it.

Recommendation:	**Ensure staff have opportunities for collaboration.**
Action Step:	Guarantee structured opportunities, such as common planning time and faculty or department meetings, for teachers to work together and discuss curricular and instructional issues.
Action Step:	Provide teachers with training on how to most effectively use collaborative time to improve student learning.
Action Step:	Allow teachers time to experiment and learn how this collaborative process operates in their unique settings.

Building the Capacity of Students

Finally, the seven study schools focused on increasing the capacity of students by providing them with the academic and developmental support necessary to reach high expectations. Students were active participants in this process and worked to improve their achievement. They understood the supports and services available to them and made use of them. This section offers recommendations for ways to increase the capacity of students and action steps to support this goal.

Recommendation:	**Ensure all students are provided a supportive school environment.**
Action Step:	Educate staff about the unique developmental needs of middle-grade students.
Action Step:	Create formal and structured programs that guarantee that each student is known by an adult.
Action Step:	Encourage a strong, positive adult daily presence in the school so that students see adults as allies.
Action Step:	Educate students about how to approach adults for assistance and support.

Recommendation:	**Provide extensive in-school academic support.**
Action Step:	Expand academic opportunities during the school day by offering students more time in academically oriented classes.
Action Step:	Reduce the amount of non-academic electives and provide more academically oriented electives for students to take.
Action Step:	Create formal structures to provide in-school academic support such as individual tutoring and homework assistance centers.

Recommendation:	**Extend the school day to offer academic and non-academic after-school services.**
Action Step:	Create structured and ongoing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful after-school activities, such as project-based learning, academic clubs, and non-academic activities, with adults.
Action Step:	Partner with community organizations, universities, and volunteers to increase the potential for offering services.
Action Step:	Eliminate obstacles to student participation in after-school programs such as cost, transportation, and food, by redistributing resources or bringing in additional resources.

Conclusion

The teachers, support staff, administrators, students, parents, district personnel, and representatives from outside agencies who shared their stories for this study were able to eloquently and enthusiastically describe why their particular schools were successful and how these schools

were able to improve. Equally as impressive was what they did not say—virtually none of the participants in this study made excuses for not holding all students to high expectations. They did not complain about a lack of time or resources. They did not disparage their administration or district. They did not protest against state standards and accountability systems. They did not place blame on their colleagues. Most notably, they did not use the students' and their families' home and community situations as an excuse for poor student academic performance.

All seven of these schools showed impressive student performance improvement in a relatively short period of time. Most moved from below average on state (and in some cases, national) assessments to above average. These schools accomplished this inspiring achievement through a belief that each and every student could achieve at high levels and that each student deserved to achieve at high levels. The staff in these schools took responsibility for student learning and found ways to provide staff and students with the support they needed to reach their goals. This responsibility required a commitment to hard work and a no-excuses attitude toward identifying and solving problems. By working together, individuals helped turn these schools around.

The seven schools in this study do not purport to have achieved their goals. Rather, the staff at these schools insist they have much more work to do. Some still wrestle with helping all students meet the state standards. Some schools struggle to provide more students with advanced-level courses that emphasize critical thinking and applied knowledge. Others see balancing between students' academic and developmental needs as a challenge. The staff at these schools are in the habit of looking ahead to identify problems. They are also in the habit of taking the responsibility to identify solutions to these problems and feel it is their duty to follow through with collective action.

Those who work in similar settings understand what these schools have accomplished. Not only are these schools performing better than schools with similar demographics, but they are performing as well as and often better than more affluent schools. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these schools are inimitable—that what they have accomplished cannot be accomplished elsewhere. These schools are like hundreds across the country. They serve a high proportion of students living in poverty; they have a range of teaching and leadership expertise; and they have a range of access to resources. Their successes stem from the commonality of purpose and their willingness to work hard together to achieve their goals. They provide valuable lessons for other school communities taking on the difficult challenge of setting high expectations for all students. These seven middle schools have proved that it can be done because they were driven to succeed.

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